

The Gift Every Child Really Wants

By Pam Leo

Whether we observe Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or Solstice, the holidays have become more stressful for many parents and less happy for many children. By the time we add shopping, wrapping, baking, decorating, and holiday events to our already busy schedules, we have less time than ever to spend with our children. When children don't get enough attention from the people they love, their "love cup" gets empty and they feel disconnected and unhappy.

If adults try to make children happy by buying them more presents to compensate for spending less time with them, we teach children that "things" are supposed to make them happy. When gifts become a substitute for love instead of a symbol of love, children begin to measure how much they are loved by how many gifts they receive. The more empty their "love" cup, the more "things" children ask for to try to fill the emptiness they feel.

The saying, "You can never get enough of what you don't really need," is especially true for children. No matter how many gifts we buy for children or how much money we spend, if their "love" cup is empty, there will never be enough gifts to make them happy. When children with an empty "love cup" have unwrapped all their gifts, they are still looking for something more. The "something more" that children are looking for is something money can't buy.

The gift every child *really* wants, is the gift of feeling connected, loved, and valued. Those feelings can't be found in any present or in any amount of presents. Children want to be with us and to do what we do. Feeling connected, loved, and valued comes from spending time with the people they love and from doing things with and for the people they love.

One of the best gifts we can give to children is the experience of the joy of giving. We can encourage children to make an "I want to give" list as well as an "I want to get" list. Children delight in giving their own gifts. When children are allowed and invited to fully participate in the holiday making, wrapping, baking, and decorating, they become more focused on what they want to give than on what they want to get. Children who feel connected, loved, and valued don't need lots of gifts to fill their "love cup."

We can break the "presents instead of presence" cycle by doing the holidays with our children instead of for them. Whether our children are still very young and we have a fresh beginning to create meaningful holiday traditions and rituals or we have older children who have been accustomed to receiving lots of presents, we can put the "happy" back into the holidays by filling our children's "love cup" with connection instead of consumerism.

The following tips are for parents who want to create a "less stress - more joy" holiday season for themselves and their children.

1. Make the decision that presents will not be or will no longer be the main focus of the holidays.
2. Invite children to join in creating a list of fun and meaningful holiday activities the family can do together and a list of kindnesses your family can do for others.
3. Request that family and friends honor your fewer gifts decision by asking them to show their love for your children in other ways. A one-on-one "Holiday Date" is a welcome gift and a wonderful way for family members to form closer bonds with children.
4. Give children the means to give a few special gifts. Take a friend's or a relative's child shopping or help the child make a gift for his or her parents.
5. Ask your children what one gift they want most and a second choice if that one is not possible. When children with a full "love "cup get one gift they really want, they hardly notice what else they do or do not get. Receiving one gift they really want satisfies more than opening ten gifts they don't really care about.
6. Try giving children their most special gift first instead of last. The reason children tear through opening presents and keep asking for another is that they are looking for that special one they've been hoping for. When they get their special one first they enjoy the rest more.
7. Slow down the frantic pace of the holidays and reduce post-holiday let down by spreading out family and friend gatherings throughout December into January.

Most of all, we can stop trying to "do it all." The people who really love us will still love us no matter what gifts we do or do not give them and whether or not we send greeting cards. We can tell family and friends that we are changing how we "do" the holidays and that we have decided to spend more time connecting with our children. When we slow down the pace and stop doing and buying too much, our children are happier, we are happier, and our holidays are happier.

Resources:

- ...Simplify Your Christmas by Elaine St. James
- ...Unplug the Christmas Machine by Jo Robinson & Jean Coppock Staeheli
- ...The Twenty-Four Days Before Christmas by Madeleine L'Engle

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