

Kids and Gift-Giving

By Russell Hyken | Thursday, December 8, 2011

It's that time of year when kids are creating their lists, checking them twice, and making sure Mom and Dad know what's nice. And just like many of you, I want to buy my boys everything! I want to watch their joy as they open a plethora of gifts, and soak in the feeling that my kids think we are the best parents ever—at least for a day or two.

During the holiday season, all loving parents want to spoil their children. I, however, am a psychotherapist and self-professed parenting expert who knows the pitfalls of even the best-intentioned fathers. My expertise tells me that I should avoid my yearning to overindulge my kids now, because I also will be teaching my children valuable life lessons for later: the benefits of delayed gratification and the positive feelings that go with working hard for the things you want.

Today's marketers, however, have it out for all of us. They don't only make ads that create the must-have toy that all kids beg for, but they also target parents with commercials that make us feel bad if we don't fulfill our kids' fantasies. So we spend and we overspend: According to a 2010 Gallop Poll, the average American family bought approximately \$715 worth of Christmas toys last year.

While the desire to overindulge your child may come from the heart, the goal of all parents, no matter what their income, should be to avoid spoiling their kids. In addition to overindulging, parents also should consider if their purchases send the right message. Buying jeans that are too 'sexy' for your daughter tells her it's OK to act like an adult. Giving a video game that is too violent to your young son may give him the idea that being overly aggressive is acceptable. And spending too much on your significant other tells your kids that you are putting your wishes before theirs. Focus on the family during this most wonderful time of the year and purchase a gift the entire group can enjoy.

Managing holiday expectations and gift-buying decisions, especially if you have overspent it in the past, may seem stressful, but it is easier than you think. Before setting out to the mall or sitting down at the keyboard, have a conversation with your excited offspring. Discuss the meaning of the holidays and the spirit of giving; then ask for a gift list. Have your kids prioritize their wishes and discuss unrealistic requests such as the 52-inch high-definition TV your daughter wants for her bedroom. In their minds, kids know that mom and dad will not buy them everything, but that does not stop them from asking.



Lastly, make sure to speak with the grandparents and respectfully request that they don't overdo it. These valuable life lessons go up the chimney if your parents become too indulgent with the holiday handouts. Guide grandma and grandpa by suggesting specific purchase requests and invite them to the house to participate in a holiday tradition or festive dinner.

Parents often spend hours shopping the stores and surfing the net for the ultimate holiday surprise. This is part of the seasonal fun and kids want gifts! Unfortunately, not all parents show their sensible sides during the holidays and lavish their children with high-dollar toys. The best gift a child can have, however, is parents who place a high priority on their emotional needs. More than presents, children want to be part of a happy family. Best wishes for a happy and healthy holiday season.