

Managing your children's expectations over the holidays

In my childhood, Christmas morning was a free-for-all. My four siblings and I crawled through a disorganized mountain of presents looking eagerly for those with our individual name on it. When we found one, wrapping paper would go everywhere, delight would be exclaimed, and then the present would be flung aside while we went searching for the next one. Within minutes the whole thing was over. To us, that was what the holidays were all about.

Looking back I see that, due to the sheer quantity of gifts, each individual one lost its meaning and value. This is one of those times when my parents showed me what *not* to do—but who can blame them? The retail marketing machine can take over the holidays, creating infinite wants in kids and inspiring feelings of guilt and shame in parents if we don't fulfill them.

This year, I propose a different approach: Going simple. Whether it's financially more viable or simply the beauty of cutting down on "stuff," going simple can be a beneficial thing for everyone—even our kids! *If*, that is, we can manage our children's expectations. Below are some ways to work with those expectations to create a new, meaningful, and truly enjoyable holiday season.

First, make it official by calling a family meeting. Propose reframing the holidays to include fun and togetherness, giving, and simplicity. Ask each family member what's most important to them about the holidays, and make a list. Emphasize the pleasure of experiences more than material items. You may be surprised to find that enjoying extended family is more important than a fancy meal, or that taking a winter hike beats standing in a long line to see Santa. Decide together on your highest priorities and values.

Fun and togetherness

This is where you include your family members' favorite activities, as well as other holiday traditions that the family can look forward to. For example: Bake gingerbread people together and then hold a decorating/most creative/most colorful contest. Throw sleds into the car and head up to the snow for hours of delight. Put on pajamas, create a new hot chocolate recipe (rainbow whipped cream, anyone?), and watch a holiday movie together. Go see the lights or have fun decorating your own house. The ideas go on and on.

Giving

Being generous and helpful aids children in their social development, increases their experience of empathy, and heightens their sense of self-worth. Opportunities to give can include baking and bringing holiday cookies to neighbors, sponsoring a child or family, volunteering at a food bank, and so much more. Watch your children's attitudes shift from "gimme" to a sense of compassion and consideration for others during the holidays. The real prize is that these positive feelings can set your kids up for a lifelong enjoyment of giving.

Simplicity

This is where the holiday rubber meets the road. At that all-important family meeting, you can

offer a pre-holiday plan for buying presents so that your kids' expectations are clear and focused. To younger kids, you might say that there is only so much room in Santa's sleigh—or that he checks in with parents ahead of time to see what quantity of gifts is best.

In the spirit of simplicity, may I present (drum roll, please!) the Four Gift Rule.

The Four-Gift Rule

The Four Gift Rule significantly reduces the toy chaos in your home and can increase your children's happiness with a shift to clearer expectations, less stimulation, and an appreciation for the thoughtful, high-quality gifts they do get. The beauty of this plan is that it lets you give unique gifts for your kids to engage with, learn from, and enjoy without blowing your budget.

The basic idea is to limit gift-giving to four gifts, one for each parameter. These parameters are:

1. Something they need
2. Something to wear
3. Something to read
4. Something they want

NEED: This could be a new lunchbox, the musical instrument they're learning at school, a new tool for their tool box, or anything they will find useful and helpful.

WEAR: Here we consider each child's sense of style and any sensory issues. It can be as simple as dress-up clothes for your toddler or a new pair of brand-name sneakers for your teen. Take your time and pick out something you know each child will like—and, since you're buying less, you may be able splurge a bit more on each gift. My son is going to enjoy super-warm wool socks this winter.

READ: Find something that speaks to their interests, or something delightful and different. If your child likes Harry Potter, buy them the complete collection, or get them all the books written by their favorite author. This applies to younger kids too, and is a great way to encourage reading for pleasure in all ages.

WANT: This can be a big item. Your child may list a few options or it may be one major want—or you might surprise them by paying close attention and then choosing an item yourself. This gift usually inspires much gratitude and pleasure. One year my son was really into bakeries, so he got gift cards to five local coffee shops. It was a complete surprise and went over really well.

Opening the gifts

Ditch the free-for-all! Savor the moment and slow it all down. Appoint a Santa and let everyone share in the delight of each gift-opening. This is a great way to model patience and empathy.

Your holiday: your choice

It comes down to the choices we make. Managing our children's expectations to slow down, serve, and simplify allows us to enjoy the holidays in a way that inspires true celebration.

WHAT: Nurturing Parenting 8-Week Series

WHO: Jinnae Anderson, Parenting Specialist for Nevada County Superintendent of Schools

WHEN: Evening session – Thursdays, 1/26-3/16/2023, 5:30-7:30 p.m. Pizza and childcare included for evening series.

WHERE: Ready Springs Elementary School 10862 Spenceville Rd, Penn Valley

WHEN: Morning session: Thursdays, 10 a.m.-noon 2/2-3/23/2023

WHERE: Partners Family Resource Center 235 S. Auburn Street, Grass Valley

COST: \$35 materials fee (scholarships available)

TO REGISTER AND FOR MORE INFO: janderson@nevco.org or call 530.238.5608