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BRING BACK THE MAGIC

Give Kids the True Gifts of the Season

by Meredith Montgomery

According to a poll by the Center for a New American Dream in 2005, three out of four Americans wish the holidays were less materialistic. Traditionally rooted in family, faith and joy, the season can be marred by commercialization. Instead, inspire the whole family to take a “buy less, get more” approach so that everyone can experience the essence of what many consider the most wonderful time of the year.

Raise Awareness

The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) reports that U.S. companies now spend about \$17 billion annually marketing to children, up from \$100 million in 1983. Many kids are formulating wish lists year-round, due to the continual bombardment of alluring commercials. CCFC Associate Director Josh Golin attests that the holiday season is a perfect time to start discussing the power of advertising and the techniques used. Teens are especially sensitive to the notion of being manipulated by adults.

For children under 8 that can't yet comprehend the persuasive intent of commercials, limit screen time with all devices. Golin advises that the scope of commercialism has changed radically. “It's no longer just television commercials, but also Internet, cell phones and video games. Plus, children's media characters are placed on every type of product imaginable. Think about limiting commercialism in all forms; you can't just turn off the TV.”

Manage Expectations

Start before the holidays. “Talk to kids about how you'll celebrate the holidays in your own home, noting that it might be unique. Focus on aspects that aren't gift-related,” suggests Golin. Plan food-focused traditions such as baking together and special group meals. Generate excitement around

spiritual aspects of the season or visits from out-of-town family members.

When shopping together for gifts, make a plan and stick with it, letting everyone know its purpose beforehand. Resist impulsive purchases trumpeted by store promotions.

Connect with Kids

New American Dream's *Simplify the Holidays* guide at Tinyurl.com/SimplifyTheHolidays encourages families to reconnect by participating in meaningful activities such as neighborhood caroling, building a gingerbread house, preparing gift boxes for the homeless, taking a nature hike or making a feeder for backyard birds.

Explore volunteer projects as a family, letting the children's interests lead. If kids are attracted to water, pick up litter along a shoreline. In the spirit of the season, donate gently used clothing, books and toys to a shelter. For animal lovers, contribute time or materials to a local animal rescue or rehabilitation center.

Attend community events such as musical performances, plays and art exhibits. Seek out inexpensive or free local activities. Kids are often enthralled by a simple tour of neighborhood Christmas lights.

Gift Buying

Make gift purchases consistent with the family's values. Golin suggests resisting the temptation to buy the season's “hot” products. “Resist buying what's advertised the most. We have power as parents and as part of a larger culture to believe there's no such thing as a must-have toy or holiday gift.” Instead, search for timeless, high-quality items that are eco-friendly and fair trade. Try wooden toys for babies and toddlers or a bamboo skateboard for teens.

Ads can make a toy look appealing because it's brand-new and ready-to-use, but homemade gifts can be a more meaningful alternative. New American Dream suggests constructing a rope swing or wooden sandbox for little ones. Given a comfortable timeframe, children can gift grownups homemade green cleaning products or re-potted herb and houseplant clippings. All ages can give away the last book they read and kick off a year-round book exchange. Forego more tangible items by gifting experiences like a zoo membership, bowling gift cards or movie tickets, or make a charitable donation to a cause that the recipient supports.

Let friends and family make shopping easier by inviting them to create such a gift registry at SoKindRegistry.com.

Unplug

Always plan for quiet time. It reduces exposure to holiday marketing, creates opportunities for family bonding and fosters independent children. Golin observes, “We can all be better about trusting our kids to entertain themselves. When reducing screen time, we don't necessarily need to suggest activities to kids. Give them the space to be bored for a minute and be amazed at what they come up with on their own.”

Meredith Montgomery publishes *Natural Awakenings of Mobile/Baldwin, AL* (HealthyLivingHealthyPlanet.com).



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