

## You are what you gift

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If our kids found school as appealing as MTV, as compelling as Nintendo, as endearing as SpongeBob or as intriguing as The Matrix, we'd be raising a generation of Einsteins. If they listened to us as often as they listen to Eminem or Britni or Beyonce, if they talked to us at least as much as they IM one another, we might all be happier. If they valued themselves at least as much as they value their bikes and cars and cell phones, their Walkmen and DVDs and CDs, their beepers and PDAs and laptops, we'd all be healthier.

But they don't. And we're not.

All too often education and home, family and self come second to material things in our children's lives. "You are what you own," might be their motto and, in truth, who can blame them? We've taught them their values. We, the yuppified, baby-booming, quiche-eating, genX-ers who have become parents. We, the children of children who grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression have overcompensated for our parents' early deprivation by buying things. Bright, shiny, mega-pixelated, raucous and perverse, bloody and booming hand-held, palm-top, plug-in things.

And so we enter another holiday season drowning in and deafened by media attempting to sell our children more things. And, of course, this year's things are bigger and better. They're updated and upgraded, smaller and more powerful, each one more necessary to life on planet Earth than the last. Or so say the sixteen minutes of commercials every half hour of children's television programming.

What's a parent to do?

**You are what you gift.** The things that you snap up off the bargain counters, wrap up in holiday tinsel and intend to pay off at eighteen percent over the months to come are much more than just things. Each one is a statement to your children about your values and permission to your children to value the world in the same way.

"Oh com'on," you're thinking, fed up with finding the deeper meaning in every breath you take. "Its Christmas time! Let the kid have some fun!"

Of course. But fun comes in lots of different shapes and sizes, colors and prices, appropriate for many different levels of maturity and skill. Choose the gifts that you give

this holiday season with more than just price in mind. While you're standing in the check-out line with that longed-for, "I'll do anything if you'll just get it for me" thing tucked neatly in the shopping cart in front of you, ask yourself why you picked it out.

**"I wouldn't any other time, but its Christmas (Hanukah, Kwanzaa)..."** Maybe the holiday season is reason enough to suspend your budget (although that decision causes a lot of families huge new year's concerns), but there's never a good reason to suspend your values. If you genuinely object to your kids owning or participating in something the rest of the year, why encourage it now? If Sally finds that toy machine gun you've forbidden under the Christmas tree, it makes no sense to pretend that Santa's choices override your own. If Billy unwraps the R-rated "Sex & Violence XII" DVD, pecks you on the cheek as he rushes off to watch it, the impact is the same whether its December or July.

The gifts that you give (and the gifts that you allow, no matter the giver) are a statement about your values. Does this mean that Danny may have to return the BB gun he's dreamt of and now finally received from a well-intended Uncle? Or that Kristin might have to trade in those rap CDs for something a little tamer? Yep. And you'll all live through the experience just fine.

**"He's going owe me for this one!"** That's not gift giving, its bribery and its backwards thinking. A gift is simply given without obligations attached. Don't overreach your budget or their privileges with the expectation that you're somehow buying a future behavior. To do so is to invite disappointment or guilt or both.

That's not to say that desirable behaviors and successes shouldn't be rewarded. Its both good parenting and good behavior management to respond to positives with positives. Should his reward for working hard in school or for doing his chores become a holiday present? Maybe. Maybe not. That one depends on the "if ...then" deal the two of you made in the first place.

**"His older sister has one. I've gotta be fair, right?"** Wrong. You don't really fall for that, "Its not fair! She's got one...." complaint, do you? The only answer is, "You're right. Its not fair .... Now let's talk about how mad/sad/jealous/resentful you are."

Your goal as a parent is not to be fair. Fair is impossible and often not even desirable.

Your goal as a parent is to recognize and respond to each child's unique needs as best as you can. This may mean that Ralph gets a car at sixteen so he can get back and forth to work but his less responsible, less mature sister doesn't. This may mean that your very academic daughter needs her own computer at ten but her athletic, socialite twin does not.

**“All of her friends have one.”** As often as you’ve lectured the kids about peer pressure, you know better. The reason to gift something to your daughter (or son) is because you believe that she wants it, is mature enough for it and it fits within your values and your budget.

True, keeping up with the peer group can be critically important especially in the teenage years. Many adolescent peer groups determine membership on a “you’re in if you own it” basis. This can be an especially difficult dilemma for the parent who wants to encourage her child to get out there and makes friends, but disapproves of the things it takes to be considered “in.” The best way through this inevitable gauntlet is to talk it through with your co-parents, with the other kids’ parents and even your child’s teachers. Learn as much as you can about the thing in question and make a careful decision. There will be times when its best to not allow your child to have the very thing that is key (in her mind, at least) to social belonging. That hurts, but if its your best decision, stick with it.

**“He already has the first three. What harm could it do?”** So he’s already memorized the first eleven “*Sex & Violence*” videos, what harm could number twelve do?

Maybe not as much as the first several eye-openers in the series, but that’s water over the dam. He can’t have his innocence (or the sleep he lost to nightmares) back, but you don’t need to encourage it, either. By gifting him the twelfth in this (fictitious but sadly credible) series, you are tacitly endorsing his consumption of this kind of stuff. That doesn’t mean that you should give him Shakespeare’s collected sonnets or the Bible instead, but do consider something that perhaps meets his interest in action within your values and year-round parenting limits.

**“He’s been begging for it for six months. Maybe now I can get some peace.”** Do you subscribe to the “happy is more important than healthy” school of parenting? Do you live so much in the moment that you’ll buy a couple of hours’ quiet at any cost? If so, enjoy the respite, however brief. If begging and whining and pleading are successful in your home, expect to hear more of the same the moment the novelty of the new thing wears off.

True, not giving in to his complaints is harder at the moment. But maturing is about learning to tolerate frustration and to delay gratification. If its something you judge to be appropriate and affordable, either show him how to earn it or where to redirect his wishes (see Parenting Pointer). Don’t reward his whining by giving in and then complain that’s he’s whining for more!

**“I know that he wants it. I think its pretty cool myself. Its safe, age-appropriate and I can afford it.”**

Have a safe and healthy and happy holiday season!

That's the spirit. Whether Santa leaves it under the tree or he finds it next to the menorah, whether the community gifts it for Kwanzaa or it's a "just-because" treat any day of any month, those are the things to gift and the reasons to gift them. Your child wants it. You've looked into it. Its safe, well-suited to his needs and abilities, to the values you want to teach and to your budget. The only thing left is to sit back and enjoy the glow of his pleasure having it.

----- **Parenting Pointer** -----

Kids find things that they must have every day throughout the year, but never more often than in the weeks ahead. We are simply deluged with "BUY THIS NOW!" messages in every medium in every moment of every day. So its no surprise that our kids are coming to us constantly, passing on the message, "Buy this now, Mommy!"

Should you (1) Ignore them? (2) Patronize them with a fleeting, "That's nice"? (3) Take careful notes about every whim and wish? or (4) Listen carefully when you can and make sure they have an outlet for their thoughts?

Time's up.

The answer's number four: Listen carefully when you can and make sure they have an outlet for their thoughts. That outlet can be as simple as an old shoe box, decorated and labeled, "**My wish box.**" Every time your son or daughter comes home with a new and desperate need, listen, then help them get it into their wish box. Cut out ads from those billions of glossies that stuff this paper full every Sunday and from those catalogues that pollute your mailbox endlessly. Walk through their favorite toy or clothes or electronics store and show them how to note the name and model, size and color and cost of those must-have items. Then, when you're ready to do the holiday shopping, sneak a look. Some of these must-haves won't be appropriate to your kids needs or to your values. Some will be too expensive. But some will be just right.