

Gifts for Good

Instilling Generosity and Joy in Children

by Elisa Bosley

Every December, parents like me lament the “gimme” culture that so easily overtakes the holidays. But with environmental and social justice issues gaining ground and everyone rethinking economic priorities, introducing your child to opportunities for alternative giving can make a world of difference.



Even little changes—such as adding a charity to the family’s giving tradition—can have a profound impact on how a child approaches the holidays. The idea is not to make a child feel bad about wanting stuff or be guilted into giving to others. Only cheerful giving makes a lasting difference. The following tips will help everyone tap into a deeper joy this holiday season by embracing altruistic and Earth-friendly gifts.

Reframe the List

Rather than instituting a blanket prohibition on traditional gifts, consider asking your child to name the two or three items he or she most wants to receive. Then, gently turn the focus outward by generating a new list, asking, “What do you love the most?”

Aside from the obvious (“Cookies!” “My iPod!”), try to capture your child’s fondness for certain things: animals, people, places or hobbies. Then ask, “How can we give a gift to that?” For example, if your daughter says “Bears,” ask if she’d like to give money to help protect panda or grizzly habitats. Play up your son’s fondness for tree forts by

donating to a tree-planting group. There are endless ways to creatively encourage giving to a cause that matters to a child.

Go Eco

When nothing but a tangible gift will do, scour natural shops, where you’ll find high-quality items made with personal and planetary health in mind. Options abound: adorable, organic, stuffed animals and nontoxic wooden toys make babies and toddlers smile. Even picky teens might appreciate a sustainable-harvest bamboo skateboard (reportedly stronger than conventional decks), or trendy, organic-fiber apparel. Also consider scouting high-end consignment stores for barely used and cost-conscious clothes and toys. Then, encourage low-impact wrappings, such as cloth napkins, kitchen towels or an old standby, the Sunday comics.

Give and Do Good

When shopping, look for fair-trade items, which means that producers were paid honest wages for their wares. Jewelry, chocolates, toys and more can be sourced from such fair-trade compa-

nies as those found at WorldofGood.org and BeadforLife.org.

The nifty, solar-powered BOGO (Buy One/Give One) flashlight at BogoLight.com does more than illuminate your keyhole; for every light purchased, another is donated to a grateful community in the developing world. When you buy the UN World Food Programme’s reversible burlap and muslin FEED bag, proceeds feed one impoverished child for one school year; it’s available at Amazon.com.

Volunteer

Return to the list you generated with your child and pick something you can do together in your town as a gift to your family’s place in the world. Do your kids love outings near the water? Spend an hour picking up trash along a local shoreline or creek. Do they enjoy the company of other kids? Have them box up gently used or new clothes, books and toys and deliver them to a family shelter housing homeless children. Whatever you do, make it your child’s choice. You’ll likely find that altruistic giving is a lot like cooking: Once kids get involved, they eat it up.