



by Karen Stephens

## Greedy to Generous Children: Ways to Make the Shift

It used to be reserved just for holidays, but today children are bombarded with glitzy commercial promotions whirling them into a frenzy of “I gotta haves” every day of the year.

Store decorators and product advertisers pull out all the stops to tantalize kids. After all, that’s the proven route to parents’ purchasing power. And if it weren’t successful, millions of research dollars wouldn’t be spent on influencing children’s product preferences. Believe it or not, enticing children’s “brand name loyalty” by the time they are age ten is a common business strategy today.

And what is the result of all that hype and manipulation? Well, many believe it’s turned our society into a culture of consumerism. We in the U. S. are thought to excessively value material goods as primary indicators of happiness, self-worth, and success.

And what’s the result of our consumerism for children? It seems like a steady stream of children’s “I wants,” and “whatcha-gonna-get-mes” whenever you leave home. In stores, rarely do I overhear children asking what someone else desires. Increasingly, children’s concepts of a gift “exchange” is severely skewed to the receiving end.

I’ve seen children racing through toy aisles, zigzagging to smack items on both sides as they bark orders to parents: “Get me this,” and “I want that.” It seems many children consider toys to be an entitlement, rather than a blessing from a parent’s self-sacrifice and generous heart.

Being raised to view gift-giving with such a narrow focus is bound to teach children something. And it’s something I don’t believe parents intend at all. I’ve never heard a parent say, “I hope my child grows up to be greedy and self-centered someday. Can you give me parenting tips on how to do that?”

Children’s sense of altruism, their desire to give and contribute to others, is needed if future communities are to be civilized, functional, and gracious. Instilling a sense of compassion and generosity must begin in childhood. If it’s not learned then, it is rarely acquired.

As with other character traits, parents are the first ones to nurture children’s consideration for others. We *can* raise children to value the intrinsic reward and warmth that a generous spirit brings to life. Parents maintaining balance is important. Through simple, everyday ways, children can gradually learn to appreciate the joy of giving as well as receiving. Here are some ways:

- Let your kids talk about the gifts they hope to receive. But also teach children to give generously to others. Purposefully talk about things your family can do to help out neighbors or the community. Talk about gifts your children hope their friends or siblings receive.

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- During family holidays, make two kinds of lists: a “wish list” *and* a “giving list.” Ask for children’s input on gift-giving ideas. What do they think Grandma needs or wants? What could make her life easier or more pleasant?
- Include children in wrapping gifts. Talk about how much the recipient will appreciate the gift and anticipate their happiness.
- Find ways for children to make “customized” gifts for others. Can they make and frame a watercolor painting for someone who needs a better view? Can they make a table centerpiece of nature items? Maybe they can put their painted handprints on plain paper to make colorful homemade gift wrap. Let children make handmade toys for their pets, too!

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- Draw attention to the basic needs of others all year long — not just during holidays. Encourage your child to feed birds or other wildlife to make their winter more bearable. Include children when you scoop snow from an elderly neighbor’s driveway.
- Include children in worthy relief efforts. Even preschoolers can help select some of their gently-used toys or clothing to donate to disaster victim collections. Let your children see you donate money and time to good causes.
- If you shop for gifts for “special people” in your child’s life — such as care providers or teachers — remember to take your child along so they can help make selections to delight others.
- Help children give the gift of memories rather than just “things.” Have children make video recording of plays they create or tape recordings of songs they sing. Then send the recordings to family members who live farther away
- Be a good role model. Let children see you engage in activities that enhance others’ happiness, whether it’s volunteering for a social service or making an item for a fundraiser sale.
- Refuse to splurge on toys you can’t afford — and ones kids will quickly forget. A few small toys and a few special treasures to value above all others is a good goal for any childhood.

Over a lifetime, the amount of money you spend on your children’s toys won’t stand out in their memories. But the amount of time you spend actually enjoying experiences together will. Take care to spend wisely.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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