



by Karen Stephens

Gift Ideas: Last Minute IOUs Can Give All Year Long

It can take hours to pick out the perfect gift for your child. And sometimes the joy your child has receiving and playing with it wears out within hours, too. But the fun of gift-giving doesn't have to fizzle the minute a birthday or holiday is over.

Parent-made IOUs for children's personalized use can be "cashed in" any time throughout the year. That keeps the spirit of giving alive far past the celebration day.

Try this out: Using 3" x 5" index cards make out 12 IOUs, one for each month of the year. Slip each one into an envelope. On the envelope, write your child's name and the month the IOU is to be opened and claimed. These make great last minute gifts when tied up with ribbon and a bow.

My favorite IOU's are made out for the gift of time together. Regardless of your child's age, there's something you can think of that they'd like to do with you and you alone. For instance, a three year old's IOU could be good for a half hour of sandbox play. A 12 year old might prefer a day fishing on the lake.

IOUs can also introduce your child to new experiences. Simply make an IOU for a month's worth of lessons. Types of lessons acceptable (and affordable!) can be listed so your child can circle which he or she prefers. Depending on your child's age and interests, lessons could be anything from tap dance to photography to gymnastics to guitar lessons and so on.

IOUs can be as simple or creative as you wish. You can make IOUs specifically for each child, or you can make them generic so any child can use them. A back rub is great for one and all, but use of the good family car for a date would only be good for a teen with a driver's license.

If you're the playful type, add a spin of suspense to the giving. Hide the IOUs all over the house and have the kids hunt for them. (Hint: Hide them according to children's ability to find them. And if you're forgetful, write down where you hid them. Lost IOUs don't do anyone any good.)

Once all the IOUs are found and read, place them with your family calendar. Make a ritual of opening one IOU at the beginning of each month. If a gift is seasonal, such as a trip to the fair, be sure it is opened during a month it can be used.

The following are some IOU ideas. I'm sure you'll think of others that will be perfect for your children. Oh, and don't forget to seal each and every one with a kiss.

Gift IOU Ideas:

- A day when *children* decide when to leave the Children's Museum.
- An afternoon of family sledding or skating; or swimming or hiking.
- One full moon woodland walk looking for owls.
- A visit to the children's library.

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- One night “camping” in the tent set up in the basement.
- A walk on the beach collecting shells.
- An afternoon “butterfly hunt” in a local garden.
- A Sunday morning pillow fight.
- Make a snow fort and have a winter picnic inside.
- A morning of tracking animals at a nature preserve.
- A fireplace weiner roast — with marshmallows!
- Pick of restaurants for a family meal.
- A fresh flower from the florist.
- \$10 donation to your favorite charity.
- Three games of ping pong.
- A long distance telephone call.
- A friend to stay overnight.
- Your pick of music for the evening meal.
- A drive to see holiday light displays.
- Your favorite book read as many times as you like.
- \$3 to buy a greeting card for anyone you choose.
- One weekend of turning the dining room table into a tent using bed sheets.
- A picnic under the tent you made of the dining room table.
- A shoulder, back rub, and foot rub.
- One movie matinee.
- Craft items to make homemade puppets together.
- A week without emptying the dishwasher, recyclables, or the trash.
- Your pick at the video rental store.
- An hour of blowing bubbles in the backyard.
- An afternoon of flying kites in the park.
- An overnight camp out in the backyard.
- A rootbeer float on a sweltering day.
- A visit to the county fair.
- A tandem bike ride at the park.
- A paddle boat ride at the lake.
- A visit to the planetarium.
- A tire swing hung in your strongest tree.
- Your choice of menu for one dinner.
- A cake on your half birthday.
- Your choice of tree to be planted outside your bedroom window.
- One night sleeping in mom and dad’s bed.
- A candlelight dinner.
- One day at a sports event, just you and me.
- Two month’s worth of any lesson of your choosing: dance, art, gymnastics, swimming
- An afternoon of baking cookies or pies together.
- A walk around the neighborhood with a video camera.
- A wrestling match with mom or dad in the living room (furniture must be moved!).
- A morning at the zoo.
- A bear hug.
- One year’s subscription to a magazine of your choice.
- On a summer night, go to the drive-in movie theatre; kids get to wear pajamas.

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*.