



How to Have a Happy Downsized Holiday

By Judy Arnall

As the economy recovers, many families will still have to put the brakes on Christmas spending. How does one cut down? How do we break it to the kids? What will the relatives think if we don't participate in the gift frenzy? Families can do all three if they communicate the changes early, with loving intent and with assurances that the holidays will be about presence and not presents.

How to Limit Children's Demands at Christmas

- Remember that children remember good times and not toys. Create rituals around the tree decorating, baking, activities and family and friend visits. Children will remember a special time with Grandma baking cookies much more than the hottest gift that is tossed aside in favour of more gifts.
- Try and get the most wanted gift on their list if possible. It only has to be one special, coveted gift.
- If you can't get or can't afford the "hot" gift, use your parent judgment to decide what toys and games have the best play value. Keep in mind that children are often disappointed with the advertising hype when they eventually get the "it" gift. Don't dismiss the second hand stores for huge bargains on consignment and gently used toys. Children DO NOT care if the toy doesn't come in mounds of wire, and clear plastic and cardboard packaging. The toys don't have to be new, just new to them. Make sure the toys are clean and working though. Keep in mind that as a parent, you know which toys offer more play value than others. Many children like simple unstructured toys that can be played with in many different ways.
- Tell the children to put all their "I want..." on a list when you are out shopping or they are watching TV. Parking the desired objects on paper assures them they won't forget and it gives you clues as to what they really, really want especially if it's written on the list five times. Writing it down tends to curb the whining and nagging out at the mall.
- Turn off the TV from Halloween onward. Watch videos instead. Children don't need to be advertised to so much during the holiday season. They may not even want the item for interest sake as much as for peer pressure sake or the fact that the media over-hypes the features of the toy.

- Explain limitations in a very age-appropriate, simple way. It's perfectly okay to tell children, "We don't have the money for that this Christmas." Or, "Santa can't bring such expensive gifts."
- Acknowledge your child's feelings of unhappiness and disappointment. Your job as a parent is not to shield your child from unpleasant feelings. In fact, you are giving them a greater gift by allowing them to experience disappointment and the self-esteem they reap from dealing with it and surviving quite well. That gift is called Emotional Intelligence and it will serve them tenfold later in life.
- Put the emphasis on people and not things. Do special things for charity, relatives, and people in the community and friends. Time is very much more appreciated than money and items from others and again, your children will remember those special moments and gratitude from others.
- Focus on doing, rather than getting. Make presents from everyday items. Kids love to make them and they experience the real joy of giving when they put so much more effort into the object, rather than to pull it off a store shelf and have Mom or Dad hand over the credit card to the salesperson.

How to Pull Out of the Family Gift Frenzy

Communicate in late October or the beginning of November to your family and friends of your intentions. Email, write, telephone or casually mention in person that you need to downsize Christmas this year. Tell your friends and family members that your family would appreciate their presence more than presents this year. Would they like to come over for a potluck supper at your place at such and such a date? People love get-togethers at someone else's house.

Don't worry; people don't notice the housekeeping or state of repairs. People just love to socialize and catch up over the holidays and they prefer to do it at anyone's house other than their own. A potluck is economical and fun because everyone can bring new dishes. Assign families with last names beginning with letters from A-H, with the task to bring appetizers. Families with names from I-P can bring main dishes and families with the letters Q-Z can bring dessert. (Chips don't count) As the host, you could provide the drinks (non-alcoholic is perfectly acceptable) and you have the makings of a very festive, fun, catch-up social event. Isn't that what the holidays are all about? People, peace and connections. Not stuff.

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