



3 HOLIDAY-GIFT STRATEGIES

"If a child is tearing through presents without a thoughtful, appreciative pause, that's a red flag for potential entitlement," says Karen Deerwester, a parenting coach in Boca Raton, Florida, and the author of *The Entitlement-Free Child*. If you're thinking, *Crap, we're doomed*, read on.

1. Give fewer gifts.

No matter how much money you have to burn on Amazon, limit yourself, says John C. Friel, a family psychologist in St. Paul. He suggests one fairly large present and two smaller ones. It's easy to make this the norm with young kids; for older ones, explain that this year the focus is going to be on relationships with others instead of gifts. "You'll have one holiday with some whining and complaining, but stick with it," says Friel. When we fill the living room, he says, "we're training kids to never be happy, because they'll never know what enough is." Fewer gifts also mean less stress for you.

2. Set rules once it's all unwrapped.

Let's be real: It's hard to control grandparents (and still be respectful).

Ever heard "I'll ask Nana—she'll totally get me the iPhone 6" and then she does? Remember that you do have control over the stuff once it's in your home, says Deerwester. Your child can keep the phone but hand it over after 6 P.M., for example, or use half his time on the new Wii to play with his little sister. (This rule helps with whole-class, 22-gift birthday-party loot, too.)

3. Insist on thank-yous.

Teach children that there's a person behind the present. Prompt three-year-olds to say "Thank you." Once kids can write, help them go beyond a generic "Thank you—I love it." Let a drama lover make a video—modeling the hand-knit hat—to send to Aunt Linda. It may feel rote at first, but eventually, says Jeffrey Froh, expressing that gratitude will become genuine: "Start early and keep at it."

WHAT TO SAY WHEN...

...it's Christmas morning/Hanukkah/her birthday/a Tuesday, and your child comes out with one of these gems.

[Sighs.] "I wanted the red one."

Not every gift is a home run. Do not run back to the store, says Jim Fay, a coauthor of *From Innocence to Entitlement*. For young kids, empathize: "That's how I feel, too, when I don't get exactly what I want." Says Fay: "It's more meaningful to have parents understand kids' feelings than it is to fix the problem." At any age, you can remind her that something is better than nothing.

[Tosses gift aside.] "Next!"

"Just say, 'Every present is given with love,'" says Karen Deerwester. (Drop this line before the holidays, too.) Focus on other rituals: making snowmen, baking cookies. "Believe it or not, kids don't really want a superficial holiday built around stuff," she says.

"I need that video game."

Sticker charts aren't only for potty training.

A 10-year-old can learn from a reward system. He earns points for good behavior; a point equals \$1 toward a \$60 game. Lesson: You don't get something for nothing.

"I made good grades. I'm getting an iPad."

"If you bribe a child with stuff to get good grades, he'll always up the ante," says Deerwester. If it's a year-round practice, it's hard to change the rules in December. Focus on praising personal successes (ignoring any eye rolls). Your child will truly value that more than a gift. And then presents go back to what they are meant to be: genuine tokens of affection.

"Mia is going to Aruba over break. We're going to Grandma's?"

You can put things in perspective without putting down other families' spending choices, says Fay. Let older kids be part of budget discussions or watch you pay bills. When the neighbors go skiing, say, "That's great. Maybe we can work toward that."