

# Take the focus off gift-getting

“IT’S THE PEOPLE,  
NOT THE THINGS,  
THAT MATTER.”

- MICHELE BORBA



*From our guest contributor, Michele Borba.*

**Spending time (not every dime) and helping your kids enjoy the holidays *without* splurging on them**

Many parents facing a toned-down holiday find that their biggest concern is not *how* to cut back this year, but how to prepare their kids for fewer presents under the tree. It's all about the timing, and *now* is when you should start prepping your kids for a back-to-basics holiday. The worst thing to do is to announce to your kids on Christmas Eve, "Oh, by the way, Santa won't be able to make it this year." Making that last-minute announcement will come as a shock to your kids after weeks of anticipation and excitement. It's best to tell them now, but regardless of when you tell them, be prepared for your kids to protest. At first, the thought of fewer presents might not sit very well with your kids, but by explaining your situation to them, you will soon find that your kids will understand. Cutting back this year will take a little effort,

but with a little planning you may discover that it not only saves money, but also takes a lot of stress out of the holidays—and it can even make them more enjoyable.

*The silver lining to spending less on the holidays is that you will help your kids understand the real meaning of the season: it's the people, not the things, that matter.*

Besides, this is a great way for your kids to learn that the gifts with the most value don't cost a thing. Here are a few ways to enjoy the true meaning of the holiday season

### **Set a Budget**

Start by taking an honest look at your family's finances. Based on your situation, decide on a holiday budget that is affordable. Write down that amount and pledge to not spend one penny more. Above all, do *not* dig into your hard-earned savings. Financial security is far more important to a child than some pricey present that is all-too-quickly forgotten (or broken). And if cutting back makes you feel guilty, ease up on yourself. Children are much more resilient than we credit them for. And remember, you are teaching your kids a valuable lesson.

### **Share New Expectations**

Pass your new holiday plans on to your kids by simply explaining that *everyone* will be receiving fewer presents. Kids don't have big expectations about the holidays unless we build them. A calm, matter-of-fact approach usually works best. If you are asked the "why" question, just be honest and say it's because money is tighter. Use the "birds and bees" talk guidelines: provide details that are age-appropriate and only on a need-to-know basis. Your kids don't need to hear dismal financial details or all about your mortgage bills. Just give your kids a heads-up enough time in advance to keep their expectations in check as the holiday season approaches.

## **Reframe “Santa”**

Over the past several decades, kids have grown to believe that the guy from the North Pole can grant any wish. I think Santa’s ‘magic giving powers’ were due to manufacturers who wanted parents to buy more-more-more, causing the holidays to become a consumer buying frenzy. So take Santa’s magic down just a notch and tell your younger kids what our grandparents were told, ‘Santa decides what he will bring to each child. He has so many boys and girls to deliver packages to. It’ll be fun to see what will be under the tree.” You don’t have to take all the magic out, just don’t build false hopes that Santa is guaranteed to bring everything your child desires.

## **Cut Out Holiday Fluff**

When it comes to the holidays, the extra little purchases here and there really tend to add up. Think about all of the holiday paraphernalia you purchased last year—gift cards, ribbon, wrapping paper, greeting cards, postage, table decorations, etc.—and get your kids involved in helping you make them instead.

For instance, your older kids can create holiday cards via the computer by typing up personal greetings, scanning photos, or decorating with online holiday images and emailing them to friends and family to save on stamps. Your kids (young and old) can create wrapping paper by decorating brown butcher paper or grocery bags turned inside out with drawings or cookie cutters dipped in tempera paint. Even younger children can make tags for presents with index cards and holiday stickers from the dollar store. Get creative with your kids. Not only will you save money, you’ll bank some fantastic holiday memories in the process.

## **Make Holidays for the Kids**

It’s expensive enough to buy gifts for your kids, but when you consider purchasing gifts for everyone else that you know,

(friends, grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents, etc.) you can quickly blow your holiday budget before you even get to purchasing gifts for kids. Instead of shopping for that mile-long list of friends and relatives, forgo the gift exchange and put that money towards the kid gifts. Your friends and family will understand and might even be relieved that they won't have to buy you something in return. After all, most of us wouldn't really miss receiving another tie from Aunt Harriet or bath powder from your sister.

### **Draw Names**

If forgoing the gift exchange with your extended family is not an option, you could propose that instead everyone draw the name of just one family member to buy a gift for. You could also set a ten dollar gift limit. This goes for both adults and kids. Having a price limit will make sure that kids have to be creative in their gift-giving and will teach them about sticking to a budget.

### **Check Out Thrift Stores**

The best gifts don't always have to come wrapped in their original packaging, and you don't have to pay full price to give someone a thoughtful gift that they will love. When shopping for gifts, don't overlook the dollar stores, garage sales, book sales at the library, thrift stores, discount stores, and e-Bay. By shopping around, you can find great sale items and perfect stocking stuffers at greatly reduced prices.

### **Emphasize Together Time**

Suggest that family members give the gift of time to your kids instead of purchased gifts. Have a family outing to a zoo, skating rink, or to the beach. You can even go berry picking or kite flying. Teaching your kids a specific skill such as how to fish, bake an apple cobbler, knit a scarf, or throw a football is also a fantastic way to give your "time gift." The point is that you are spending time together, and whatever you

choose to do, being together often proves to be more memorable than opening up that “it” toy or electronic device that will soon be forgotten.

### **Suggest Handmade Instead of Store Bought**

While preparing for that gift exchange, specify that a certain number should be no-cost items. Doing so makes Christmas less consumer-driven *and* brings back the true spirit of giving. Aside from crafty ideas, remind your kids that coupon books are great gifts that they can share with family members. These coupons can promise to call Grandma once a week, pledge to bake cookies for Grandpa, or vow to take out the trash for Mom sans nagging. In the end, remember that the holidays are really meant to be about love, togetherness, and wonderful memories. ‘Cutting back’ this year may actually just be a blessing in disguise, a way to help your kids understand the true meaning of the holidays and bring back the real magic.

**Happy holidays!**



Dr. Michele Borba is an educational psychologist, parenting expert, TODAY show contributor and author of 22 books including *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions: 101 Answers to Your Everyday Challenges and Wildest Worries* and *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*.

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