

The Artful act of Giving



From guest contributors Dr. Michele Borba and Dr. Marilyn Price-Mitchell

Much like the creative inspiration that flows through paint brushes and words of poetry, giving is an artful expression of caring for someone or something beyond ourselves.

Most of us learn the art of giving in our childhoods. I remember how my mother coordinated a neighborhood bake-off so we could take sweet holiday treats to our local nursing home. With several other families, we delivered trays of goodies and sang carols for the residents. I remember how I felt as I witnessed gratitude through the eyes of elderly patients, some of whom could not speak.

I quietly observed the hours of love stitched into the colorful wool mittens knitted by my grandmother, a project she worked on throughout the year. And then, just after Thanksgiving, I'd help her take those love-filled mittens to a

children's shelter. Yes, the mittens were artful pieces of craftsmanship, but the expression of caring behind the mittens was an illustration of something much bigger.

These childhood experiences were almost 60 years ago. But they still flood my senses every year at the holidays even though my parents and grandparents have long since passed. Those meaningful memories of giving became a part of who I am.

What I know today as a developmental psychologist that I didn't know as a child is how important learning to give is to the health of our relationships, our wellbeing, and even how we engage in our communities. In my book, *Tomorrow's Change Makers: Reclaiming the Power of Citizenship for a New Generation*, I share stories from civically-engaged young people who reflected on their growing up years and how they learned the art of giving.

Speaking of her father, Danielle, age 21 said, "He never saw social barriers. He saw people's needs and he acted on them, no matter what background they had, no matter their circumstances. He was never afraid to get his hands dirty." Danielle's father was her inspiration, the person from whom she learned the art of giving—actions that flow from within to make a difference in other people's lives.

Parents not only shape how children give to their communities, they also shape how families give to each other and the positive relationships that evolve from those actions.

Four Ways to Shape Lifelong Habits of Giving

The following are four ways you can inspire children to become givers, shaping their lifelong values about giving, family, and citizenship:

1. Give Voice to the Meaning of Gift Giving

You can help children become more mindful about gift giving

simply by encouraging them to think, voice their thoughts, and then act on them. Engage children in open-ended questions that dig more deeply into the meaning behind giving, like:

- If gifts could talk, what would they say?
- What gifts have you treasured most? Why?
- What does a gift really mean?
- If there is an art of giving, what does that art look like for you?
- What is a gift you would never return?
- How do you measure the value of a gift?

2. Turn Your Family Values into Action

Discussions about giving can lead to identifying and articulating family values. Turning those values into action is a key to shaping children's personal art of giving. Decide as a family how your values can be transformed into holiday gifts for family and friends. What kinds of gifts shared between family members and close friends are most meaningful? Decide on gifts that will bring this meaning to you and your children's lives. Don't be afraid to make changes from previous years and adapt to changing economic times.

3. Connect the Art of Giving to Stewardship

It takes the combined efforts of families, schools, and communities to raise caring citizens and stewards of the planet. Families play a vital role when they help children connect the art of giving to lifelong citizenship. There are thousands of ways children and families learn to give throughout the year that shape a child's identity and personal art of giving. We are stewards to each other and the natural world around us. You can help children discover the daily ways they act as givers to their parents, siblings, neighbors, the earth, and those in need around the world by recognizing their small but significant gift-giving actions. Parents can bring meaning to these actions through family conversation starters

like:

- How is doing chores around the house connected to giving?
- What does it mean to leave a flower or light a candle in remembrance of a person who has died? How does this action connect with giving?
- How can we practice our family values by cultivating the art of giving in our home?
- What do we most want from our family relationships? How would those wishes be gifts to each of us?
- How is recycling (and other conserving behaviors) a gift to the earth? Why should we care?

4. Engage Children in Community Giving Projects

Children mostly associate the holidays with being *receivers* of gifts. But according to studies in human development, it is *gift giving* that reaps the biggest psychological rewards. Even very young children can be involved in family projects that help others in your community. Take time. Let your children be creative.

Allow children to *feel* the power of giving. It's that feeling that lasts a lifetime.

Michele Borba, Ed.D. is an internationally renowned consultant, educational psychologist and recipient of the National Educator Award who has presented workshops to over a million participants worldwide. She is a recognized expert in parenting, bullying, youth violence, and character development and author of 22 books including UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About Me World, The 6Rs of Bullying Prevention: Best Proven Practices to Combat Cruelty and Build Respect, The Big Book of Parenting Solutions, and Building Moral Intelligence. She has appeared over 130 times on the TODAY show and is a frequent expert on national media including Dateline, The View, Dr. Oz, Anderson Cooper, CNN,

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