

The Bulletin

Lesson that keeps giving Holidays a good time to teach kids kindness

By Alandra Johnson / *The Bulletin*

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Opening presents is fun. Just ask any kid who celebrates Christmas. Many kids get presents from not only their parents, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings, not to mention Santa. Christmas often means many presents to unwrap and stockings to unstuff.

Most kids innately understand the excitement of presents. Getting stuff comes naturally.



But what about another part of the holiday? What about giving?

Christmastime is often referred to as the season of giving. But sometimes giving can be overshadowed by all of the getting.

Susan Kuczmariski, Chicago author of “The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go,” doesn't think many parents focus on the importance of giving. “I think they forget this one.” In the hustle and bustle of life, teaching kids about giving can get pushed aside. “We forget to talk about kindness and ways to show kindness,” says Kuczmariski. But Christmastime offers an opportunity to focus on generosity. “The season is very rich for nurturing the spirit of giving.”

Local giving

Bend mom Lanora Bloxham says giving was always an important aspect of Christmas when she was a girl. Now she tries to instill those same values in her two children: Cassidy, 13, and Camerin, 9. Bloxham and her husband take the kids to buy presents for each other. When they were 5 or 6, this was trickier. Bloxham remembers having to guide her son to make sure what he was picking out was a good fit for Cassidy and not just what he liked best. “Now he knows what Cassidy likes.”

She believes this gift-giving tradition is important.

“I think it helps. It makes them well-rounded. It makes them say, ‘It's not just about me.’”

Next week the family plans to make cookies and candy to give to the neighbors.

“You don't always have to receive gifts, but you do have to give,” says Bloxham.

Bend dad Bob Feseler says this time of year his two sons, Ian, 10, and Adam, 8, get really excited about getting presents. “They really want to see what they are going to get, and they want to get it now,” Feseler says.

But he thinks these desires are tempered by other efforts. Feseler and his wife do things to help the boys think about others. They throw a few dollars into the Salvation Army buckets, take leftover supplies to the Shepherd's House homeless shelter and bring a gift for disadvantaged children to put under the giving tree at their school.

Helping kids

Efforts like the Feselers' and Bloxhams' can have a lasting impact on kids and how they view giving as well as the holidays. Julie Lytle, the director of Whittier Trust Co.'s philanthropy services department, frequently works with parents about teaching kids the importance of giving and charity.

She encourages parents to begin early, starting when children are 4 or 5, so that giving becomes a habit that sticks. Lytle says a great way to start is to implement something similar to what the Bloxham family does, to have children buy presents for other family members. This gesture, while sometimes time-consuming or difficult logistically, helps kids begin to think about gifts in a different way. They put themselves in the position of the giver, which, in turn, can help them become more grateful for the gifts they receive.

When a child is a little older, he or she can begin picking out presents to donate to local charities or giving trees, Lytle says. Parents may also want to consider incorporating giving into regular family practices. For instance, on each birthday, a child would help buy something for someone in need.

Kuczarski says parents can also encourage kids to use their own observations to determine who may need kindness. Maybe a child at school has a sick parent. Parents can help children think about how to reach out.

Lytle encourages parents to set an example of giving throughout the year, not just during the holidays. For instance, making soup for a sick neighbor or doing something sweet for a sibling's birthday. While giving should be a year-round trait, the truth is, the holiday season is when it comes to many people's minds. Lytle says Christmas or New Year's are great times to start. “It's never too late to start. Make giving a part of your family legacy.”

Parents' roles

Parents should be overt about their giving, according to Lytle. Too often, parents and kids are busy, which means much of the parents' giving takes place away from the kids. They don't know about the donations to charity or volunteering or baking. “We often shield them from it,” says

Lytle. While parents need not disclose the dollar amounts they donate, Lytle encourages parents to slow down and talk about giving, including why they do it.

“How do they learn to be generous otherwise?” Lytle says.

Furthermore, she thinks we should make our motives clear. Sometimes people have the wrong view of giving. We tend to associate it with martyrdom, when the truth is that “giving is a very joyful thing” that makes people feel good.

As Americans, Kuczarski says, we may have a skewed view of giving. We believe we need to feel good about ourselves first — that everything is great in our own households — before we reach out to help others. Instead, she believes people should reach out first and let those acts help lift us up as well. “I think giving magnifies the heart,” says Kuczarski.

Parents may also want to consider different tools to encourage children to give. Lytle recommends the YouthGive website, which tells kids about a bunch of cool charities where they can donate their money.

Being generous, kind and giving is “not something that is just soaked up in the culture,” according to Kuczarski. “It has to be taught by parents.”

Teaching children how to be kind, however, is a great gift that should pay rewards into the future.

Ways kids can give

- Make Christmas cards for friends or family members.
- Help bake cookies and give them to neighbors or friends.
- Help pick out gifts for siblings and parents.
- Visit a local giving tree, select the name of a child in need and pick out presents for that child.
- Donate food or toys to a local shelter.
- Call grandparents and older relatives.
- Offer to shovel an elderly neighbor's driveway or help with some difficult task.
- Ask children to help with gift planning. What should you give to Aunt Rose? What about Grandma?
- Make or decorate gifts to give to relatives. Visit a local craft store for plenty of ideas.
- Wrap presents together.