

A Simpler Christmas

My children aren't supposed to know there is an oversized American Girl Place shopping bag stuffed with presents stashed away in my bedroom closet. I have a mountain of bargain finds, admired goodies and toys to die for tucked away on a shelf. I found that shopping ahead spreads the financial burden throughout the year and helps me avoid the last-minute holiday rush.

Sounds like a plan, doesn't it? I thought so, too, until four years ago. Something happened that made me rethink my supposedly brilliant strategy.

It was the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, but I felt like a louse! The tree looked bulimic—only I was the one who had binged. Brilliantly wrapped packages were bulging from every available nook and cranny.

I slumped to the floor and thought: *We have only two children. There's enough here for 10!*

My husband and I stared at each other. We realized things had gotten out of hand. We had to ask ourselves: What message are we giving our children?

One by one, we started dismantling the swollen pile. This present can wait for a birthday, this one for next Christmas, this one for a special reward for hard work.

Finally the stack looked sensible.

Right then and there, we made a decision. In the future, Christmas gifts would be limited to three types: 1) a gift really desired, 2) a needed item or 3) something educational. Of course, our children hated the idea and hoped we would eventually come to our senses.

We haven't.

And we've seen a change. No longer is Christmas an endless list of "wants." There is a new emphasis on cherished gifts. This represents a stark contrast to the disturbing trend among kids today to feel entitled to get whatever they want, whenever they want it.

As I listen to children move through the hallways of our house, I hear the chatter of "more." "We have more videos than you." "I have a CD player in my room." "You don't have your own phone line?" "I'm asking for a laptop." "You need a cellphone to look important."

They get it from their parents. My favorite is the mother who proudly boasts that her daughter will outdo everyone in the neighborhood. She will have the best of everything—before everyone else. The daughter knows this strategy and is horrified if anyone beats her to the material punch.

Not understanding her conscious intention to overload her daughter with "stuff," I naively asked, "Aren't you worried you're spoiling her?" The blank stare she gave me was enough to answer my question.

One summer the hot ticket was a scooter. Everyone on our block ran to the stores to buy one. My kids asked, but they knew what was coming: "Tell me again why I should run to the store to buy you a \$100 item?"

Materialism not only distorts the meaning of Christmas but also creates ungrateful kids. It's time to stop the madness. Instead of a new scooter, take your kids to a soup kitchen and let them serve. Visit a homeless shelter or a hospital children's ward and put things in perspective.

I know what I am saying isn't new, but we need to hear it regularly. It's so easy to indulge our kids this time of year. We need to examine our motives.

Is our overindulgence related to guilt from being absent or unavailable? Is it an attempt to communicate love, compete with others, create an identity or look successful? Is it the result of idol worship, a lack of self-restraint or misguided thinking?

When I see kids quickly open presents and throw them off to the side without even a thank you, I know something is wrong. When little Suzie tells me Christmas was no fun because she didn't get what she wanted, I am concerned. The Grinch hasn't stolen Christmas; our ungratefulness has.

Christmas is about God giving His Son as a glorious gift to mankind. Don't clutter that gift with so many others that He gets lost in the fray. This season, teach your children to cherish the gift they already have—Jesus.