

Ask the Expert:

Breaking the Entitlement Cycle During the Holiday Season

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Q: The economy has greatly affected my family's income, and we will be cutting back expenses during the holidays. How do I help my child cope with this change? I also want her to understand that money does not equal love. How do I accomplish this?

Start by focusing on family holiday traditions rather than gifts. These traditions are important to children and help them feel safely and securely grounded within the family. For example, baking and decorating cookies is a fun tradition that allows you to incrementally increase your child's autonomy through completing age-appropriate tasks. Being the sprinkle holder may not be appropriate for your 12-month-old but would be a great job for your preschooler! Not only will your family be having fun, but you will also be constructing an onramp which will launch your child into a successful adulthood.

Despite our best intentions, some children will express disappointment. All parents have trouble seeing their child in pain and discomfort. However, your response is important. Supporting your child in her disappointment rather than avoiding it altogether provides an opportunity for her to learn how to handle negative experiences. Doing this with you first provides her the foundation she will need to deal with disappointment in her adult life. You may also want to express and model your sadness that you cannot provide her with everything she asks for. This will open the floor to discuss the differences between love and money, and build healthy pro-social skills.

Q: I'm frustrated with my preschooler. He asks for things and does not seem to appreciate what he already has. What can we do to change this behavior?

Are the items he is asking for age appropriate, or do you think you have been giving him too much, too soon? Children always make requests but really do expect parents to set age-appropriate limits on what it is they can have. Don't be afraid to say "no." Aim for structured warmth: providing

appropriate limits while maintaining your warm demeanor.

It is never too soon to expose young children to the wider world and explain, in an age-appropriate way, what economic disparity looks like. Is it time for your son to donate old toys or clothing? Talking about the importance of giving, and deciding what to give and to whom to give it will help your child connect to this process in a concrete way. Children at this age do not have the cognitive capacity to fully understand the monetary value of their donation, but they do understand that another child would benefit from their old teddy bear or the shoes they have outgrown. Cultivating a family tradition of volunteering around the holidays can also help him develop an appreciation for what he has. These activities

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also build your relationship with your child, the foundation of a young child's social and emotional health.

Q: We are worried about this upcoming holiday season. Our four-year-old only cares about receiving gifts because she knows that she is a "good girl." How can we set a positive foundation for her self-confidence without promoting the development of entitled behavior during this holiday season?

Many parents believe that the development of self-esteem and self-confidence means protecting your child from all negative experiences. This is simply not true and can have devastating consequences for a child's development. Children need their parents to



help them accurately appraise their skills and to set limits when appropriate. Acknowledging that your daughter is good at soccer but has a hard time making friends will help her learn that she is good at some things and needs to work harder on others. Using labeled praise versus general praise will help your child understand the behavior that you appreciate and stop the message that everything she does is amazing. These skills, in combination with a discussion about giving during the holidays, can go a long way in cultivating empathy—a pro-social skill needed for success.

In this day and age, many parents institute behavioral plans for children with normative behavioral difficulties. This typically happens during the holidays when little ones are excited and having difficulty regulating their behavior. While we may say things like "Be good! Santa is coming!" it is not helpful for children to be taught to "be good" only for the holidays. Using the holidays to reflect on the past year, however, will highlight for your child her strengths and validate her hard work of trying to be a good person rather than being good for her gifts.

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