

Handling Disappointment

Holiday time is here again! Amidst the joys and celebration are the inevitable frustrations and disappointments, especially with our children. As much as we try to shop without children in tow, it happens. And it's not a bad idea to get school-aged children in the habit of shopping for others.

Finding yourself in the commercial-frenzied world of shopping—if not in the stores, then on television, or in catalogues, the first frustration you probably face is the “gimmies.” What we really want is an altruistic child who thinks nothing about what he wants but only about the needs of others. When we have visions of greedy, narcissistic children dancing in our heads, our anger gets fueled, and we react in ways we regret.

The first thing we need to remember is that our children are naturally egocentric. It cycles throughout their development, as we see clearly with the swing back into egocentricity in the teen years. So when your expectation is set appropriately, you will have an easier time. If you expect that your child is going to be more interested in herself than what Aunt Martha might like, then you can respond calmly. “You wish you could have lots of things for Christmas. (Acknowledge and validate her point of view) Right now can you put some of those wishes into Aunt Martha’s head and think about what she might like?” (redirecting her thoughts without criticizing her wishes). When expectations are realistic, reactions are calmer.

You will spend far less time fighting with resistant, demanding children if you take a little extra time to pay attention to their agendas and let them know that their wishes are heard. Imagine your child focusing in on something he wants when you want to move on with your agenda:

“Wow, Mom, look at this remote-control car. This is so awesome. I *have* to have it!” he shouts.

You say, “Oh, that is a beauty. I see why you would want it. I love the color, don’t you? And the chrome all around it really makes it shine.”

“Yeah, and look at this remote. You can make it do all kinds of stuff. Can I have it?” he asks.

“You know, I just saw a beautiful sweater over there that I would give anything for. So I know just how you’re feeling. It’s disappointing when you want something really badly, and it’s just too much money. Wouldn’t it be neat if we each had a magic wand, and we could make both the car and the sweater free! What else would you want if you had a magic wand?” You ask with genuine curiosity.

“Oh, man. I’d get this and this and this and, well maybe not that, but this,” he says, eyes wide.

“I wonder what it would be like to be an elf in Santa’s workshop. Do you think you could make anything you wanted?”

“Cool, that would be so awesome. I’d bring home so much stuff,” he says.

“What would be the first thing you would make?”

“A bomber jet with an eight-foot wingspan.” He’s off in his imagination.

“What would you make for Daddy?” you ask as you lead him toward the men’s department.

Sound too good to be true? It works. Maybe not this smoothly every time, but it works because the child’s desires are acknowledged and taken seriously. Typically your reaction would probably have been something like, “We went over this. We’re here to shop for daddy not to get anything for you. Come on we have to get going.” If that works, fine. But many times that reaction together with a tone of anger or annoyance is met with resistance from a child who can’t just let it go and move on. Then you have an angry, frustrated child for the rest of the shopping trip who will never be able to think about what daddy might like.

Too often we get stuck in fearing a tantrum or having to get what they want, so we avoid indulging their desires at all costs. But disappointment is an important experience for a child to learn to cope with. If the tantrum happens, allow it. Don’t avoid it by either ignoring it or trying to fix it. On opening that disappointing present from Aunt Martha, begin by acknowledging the disappointment before teaching the lesson of the thought that counts. Either, “Those are really nice socks and you should be grateful” or “Don’t worry, we can take them back and get something you really want” teaches the child that his feelings don’t count or that he should always be happy. Children are perfectly

capable of understanding and accepting the fact that they can't have everything they want—when their desires are accepted. “I know socks aren't the most fun present. Aunt Martha probably doesn't know what you like. We sent her a book and don't know if she'll like that either. Buying presents for people you don't know too well can be difficult. It was nice that she sent you a present though, wasn't it?” This pulls it all together—acknowledgment, acceptance, and the lesson you want him to learn.