

Managing Children's Holiday Expectations

The holiday season is an exciting time of the year for children but fraught with high expectations that can lead to disappointments. People are shopping. Decorations are going up. Holiday songs are everywhere. School is almost out. There are presents, and parties, and family dinners.

Here are some parenting tips to help your expectations of your children be appropriate and realistic.

Children want what they want when they want it. This doesn't mean they should have it; it only means you should *expect* it so you won't freak out when they beg and demand. Make sure you are not expecting your children to be considerate of your Christmas budget. When we expect that they should behave the way *we* want in order to make *our* lives easier, we set them up for failure.

Discuss holiday plans with your children. Make sure they know what the family will be doing for the holidays—trips to grandparents, etc. Problem solve with them about how to make the visits work well. Empathize with the difficulty of doing what grandma expects and try some role-playing to help prepare your child for the visit. Discuss past holiday visits—what worked and what didn't. Preparation and anticipation can help.

Let them make their ultimate wish list. Let your children put as much and whatever they want on their Christmas lists. Explain that as the big day gets closer, they will have to whittle and prioritize. Every time they demand something, you can say, "Put that on your wish list!" As the holidays get closer, explain that they need to pick three or four things from their wish list that they really want. Ask them to tell you why these things are what they want the most.

Talk about wanting but not always getting what you want. Since Santa Claus has to give presents to children all over the world, he has to keep his presents small and simple. To be fair, he can't give some children more or better presents than others. So the wish list for him should be short and simple. Remember, it's always okay to want. It's a normal part of life. So is disappointment. Discuss what disappointment feels like as well as the let down when all the presents are opened.

Involve them in giving. Take the time to shop with a child for presents for family members or help them make presents. It is very important to include them in the *giving* aspect of Christmas. Discuss what each person might like and how much

money you have to spend. Gift giving is a subtle way to impart lessons about money and spending. For children, the delight in participating in present giving (or present making) is often contagious. Watch how excited they are when someone opens a present they picked out or made.

Discuss tighter budgets this year. Explain to your youngest that the country is like a really big family. As she knows, sometimes your family can spend money and sometimes it can't. Now is a time when the big family has to cut back so all the little families like yours have to help out and spend less too. Perhaps even Santa has less in his shop this year in order to help out the big family. Teens can certainly understand the facts of our current financial difficulty and how it affects your family. No need to sugar coat the problem, but definitely explain that it is temporary. Until the country's finances are better, your pocketbook will need to be tighter.

Acknowledge feelings of disappointment. We can become scolding and punitive when children act disappointed with gifts. Instead, let them know that their disappointment, even anger, is normal and understandable. From that point of connection, we can talk to them about how to go back to the situation and make different choices or see it from a different point of view. Try something like, "You wish we had given you a different game, and of course you're angry about it. I don't blame you. It's hard to be disappointed. You have a choice here. You can put it in the closet and never look at it again, you can give it to someone who might like it, or you can check it out and see if you change your mind. It's your choice." When you acknowledge and accept their feelings, they will eventually be more open to gratitude. When you do whatever you can to prevent their disappointment you set them up to expect to always get what they want. You might say, "I understand that you don't like what Aunt Betty got you. However, she needs to be thanked for getting you a gift even if you didn't like it. How do you think you can say it so it feels right to you and so she will feel appreciated?"