CCFC Guide To Commercial-Free Holidays

Tips for Resisting Holiday Hype

Brought to you by some of your favorite activists, advocates & authors.

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Introduction

For parents trying to pass on positive values to children in a commercialized culture, the December holidays pose an especially difficult challenge. Unless we unplug completely and move to the woods—not a viable, or even attractive, choice for every family—it's hard to escape being hounded by hype. Each year, holiday marketing begins earlier. And our children, targets for marketing all year round, face an ever intensified onslaught of advertising designed to supplant the cultural, spiritual, social-political meaning of the holidays with materialistic values—celebrating acquisition instead of altruism, spending instead of spirituality, and getting instead of giving.

There's no one size fits all method for navigating the holidays with our values intact. So we created CCFC's Guide to Commercial-Free Holidays to provide an array of suggestions, from people we respect and admire, for reclaiming family and community celebrations from corporate marketers.

We hope you enjoy our Guide, and whichever holidays you celebrate.

Susan Linn
Director, CCFC

From *The Story of Stuff*, Free Range Studios

Putting Others' Needs Above Our Wants

One way to fight excessive commercialism and feel the true spirit of the holidays is to focus family gift-giving away from fulfilling personal desires and toward meeting the needs of others. Find a family with fewer resources than yours and give them gifts that they need. For more than ten years, our family has tried to be like an extended family to two families who are unrelated to us and who live not far from us in inner city New Haven. One family is headed by a grandmother who is raising her grandchildren and the other is headed by a single mom. Our daughter has been a mentor to the oldest granddaughter in the first family. And our son has been--and still is--a mentor to the only son of the single mother. Throughout the year, but especially during the holidays, we have tried to make it our business to find out what our "families" need and do our best to respond. This gives us and our children less of what we may want, but it gives our extended families much more of what they really need. And that's the way we like it.

Enola Aird, JD, is an activist mother, director of The Motherhood Project, and author of *Watch Out for Children: A Mothers' Statement to Advertisers.**

Give the Gift of Media Literacy!

We all want our children to experience the love, hope, and generosity of the holidays. But how can we avoid the clever ways media and marketers grab our children's attention and wrap even those special feelings in prefabricated, prepackaged messages? This year, help your children understand the hype so they can play an active role in creating a commercial-free holiday season.

1. **Do your own work.** Become familiar with what's out there competing for your children's attention. Watch what they watch; listen to their music; read their books and magazines, so that you know what messages media send them.

2. **Listen to what they like and why.** Don't assume you know why they want what they want. Ask and you might be surprised by their answers. She may love the grown-up feeling those too-sexy clothes give her. He may be enthralled with the storyline in that too-violent video game. Only when you understand where they're coming from can you offer alternative options – other ways to feel grown up, other storylines without violence.

3. **Bring them the world on your terms.** Reflect on what they say. Share your discomfort. Help them notice the bigger picture, for example, of how shopping with friends looks like a lot of fun but also connects her with other stuff she might not have noticed or thought about, or, how acting like a cool slacker dude may also mean he has to pretend to not like school or try very hard in English class.

4. **Start young.** You can help your four- or five-year-old develop a vocabulary and a way of talking that will set the stage for conversations for years to come. What better way to introduce the word "stereotype" than by walking through the "blue" and "pink" aisles of any toy store? Offer them the full rainbow of colors. If you question, they'll question.

'Tis the season all right. But you'd better watch out! Give your child the gift of a critical eye along with a warm heart and wait for the special moment he or she refuses to be limited and says, "That's silly. Real girls and boys aren't always like that." Then give the little sugar plum a big hug.

Lyn Mikel Brown, EdD, **Sharon Lamb, EdD**, and **Mark Tappan EdD**, are the authors of *Packaging Boyhood: Saving Our Sons From Superheroes, Slackers, and Other Media Stereotypes,* a follow-up to Sharon and Lyn's award winning *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters From Marketer's Schemes.*

*CCFC Steering Committee

Nancy Carlsson-Paige, EdD, is Professor of Education at Lesley University. A mother and a grandmother, she is the author of *Taking Back Childhood: Helping Your Kids Thrive in a Fast-Paced, Media-Saturated, Violence-Filled World.**

Gifts That Show You Care

I like to give gifts to my grandchildren that don't come from stores and that show them I care about them and their interests. Here are some of the gifts I've given my grandkids over the years.

I made a book for my grandson Jackson when he was two years old. In it I put photos of Jack doing things he loved like rolling a big ball, jumping off stairs, and going down the slide at the park. Underneath each photo, I wrote a short caption that described how Jack loved to do the activity pictured in the photo.

For my grandson Miles, who loved playdough at age three, I made a special batch of home-made playdough and gave him a little box of tools--plastic knives, a garlic press, and wooden shapes that he could use for making prints in the dough.

When my granddaughter Isabella was 18 months old, she was in a phase of fascination with people's purses, and the things she found inside—especially wallets. So I gave Isabella a big purse and in it I put a comb, notepad, a coin purse with large coins, an old cell phone and a wallet with discontinued credit cards that she loved to sort and stack.

The Choices We Make with Our Money Can Change the World

It was a brisk fall afternoon back in 1994 and I was a young financial advisor in Philadelphia, PA who was about to experience a life-changing conversation with my good friend Bill.

Here's the gist of it. Bill shared with me over lunch that day that his in-laws, Trudy and Sam, had been struggling with how to manage the gift-giving extravaganza that had overtaken their all-family Christmas celebration. They were especially concerned with how it was impacting their grandchildren.

Trudy and Sam's solution: counter the "it's all about me" focus with a simple act of gratitude. In addition to one gift, each grandchild also received a "share check." Here's how it worked. The "share check" was a $25 check from Trudy and Sam with everything filled-in except the "pay to the order of." It was intentionally left blank. The goal: each grandchild had to give the money away to a charitable cause they were passionate about. And the best part, it worked! The grandkids now use their "share checks" along with their own money to make a difference in the world. It's a simple but elegant way to shift from the gotta-have-it-now emphasis of the holidays.

I've told that story to thousands of people around the country and the reaction is always the same, 'what a great idea!' I agree. Give it a try.

Nathan Dungan is the founder of Share Save Spend® and co-author of *Personal Finance: A Lifetime of Responsibility*, a textbook for high school students.

*CCFC Steering Committee

Nancy Gruver is Founder of New Moon Girl Media: a creative online and magazine community for girls ages 8 and up.

The Gift of Self-Expression

For me, the greatest gift any of us can receive is to feel heard. Listening to children is a great start. But feeling heard and understood is the real need they have. Talking with my adult daughters on the phone they can tell quickly if my attention has drifted. If they have any doubt, they interject, "Mom, are you listening?" to yank me back to what they're saying.

This holiday season think about gifts you can give that will encourage children to express themselves. Most importantly, they need an emotionally safe space and many options to express how they feel and what they want. Given the chances, each child will find the ways of self-expression that feel right for him or her: body language, talking, stories, drawing, music and singing, construction, photography, sports, dance, inventing, poetry, videos, knitting, and playing are just some of the possibilities.

And I believe it's equally important for children to see adults expressing ourselves honestly in the ways that are most true for us (see options above). When we share our deepest self with children of any age, they know it's a priceless gift. And it shows them how we value and respect their self-expression – a gift that truly keeps giving.

Simplify Your Holidays this Year!

The Center for a New American Dream's national surveys consistently show that Americans feel put upon by the commercialization of the holiday season and want more of what matters, not just more stuff. For the past 13 years, one of the New Dream's most popular publications has been our "Simplify the Holidays" guide. The guide is filled with ideas on how to reduce the holiday season's often frenzied pace and increase your personal fulfillment. It features eco-friendly gift ideas for everyone from kids to grandparents and includes fun things to do with the family that won't cost money or create more holiday stress.

This November, we published the seventh version of the guide with a whole new section on how to reduce waste during the holidays including low-waste wrapping and decorating techniques. And, as always, the guide is filled with stories and suggestions from New Dream members who have successfully simplified their holidays, like this one from supporter Amy Mann:

"Our children get a lot of presents from family at Christmas time, so instead of everybody getting another gift from Santa Claus, he brings our family only 1 gift, but it is always "something that brings the family together". So, as a family, we've been given family games, kits to make things ourselves, and when the children were little, cookies with supplies to decorate them."

The Center for a New American Dream's "Simplify the Holidays" guide can be downloaded at www.newdream.org.

Kathy Hedge is Acting Executive Director of the Center for a New American Dream and mother to two young boys.

Allen Kanner, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and a founding member of CCFC. He's a father, a columnist for *Tikkun* Magazine, and co-editor of *Psychology and Consumer Culture*, and of *Ecopsychology.**

Buy Green, Buy Fair, Buy Local, Buy Used, and Buy Less

People have celebrated the holiday season from time immemorial, the magical moment of the solstice never ceasing to amaze us as the sun begins its long return home. But as we all know, the corporate commercialization of the holidays has transformed this precious time into one of material lust and stressful shopping. To begin reclaiming the mid-winter we can "Buy green, buy fair (trade), buy local, buy used, and most importantly, buy less."

We can also give our children an unexpected gift: a week free of television, say, from December 20-27. It's a gift that may take some getting used to, but the rewards are great. Suddenly there is bountiful time to be together as a family. There is space for quiet, with all its multi-colored nuances. There is a seed planted that can grow into more TV-free time during the rest of the year. The holidays are reclaimed.

Christmas Coupons at the Kassers

On Christmas Eve, my wife and I sit down and make little colored pencil drawings on slips of paper as coupon gifts for our two sons. Some coupons let them skip their fruit or vegetable at dinner but still get dessert, some let them stay up 15 minutes past their regular bedtime, some let them not have to pick up their mess after they've been playing, and some make it so my wife or I stop what we are doing and read them a book or play a game of their choice. For their birthdays, I also give each boy a "Fun Day with Dad" coupon, where each gets to plan a whole day of activities. Now our boys sometimes give us coupons for presents too – my wife and I have received coupons for back massages, taking out the compost, and even "no bickering for the whole day."

Tim Kasser, PhD, is Professor of Psychology at Knox College. He's a father and author of *The High Price of Materialism.**

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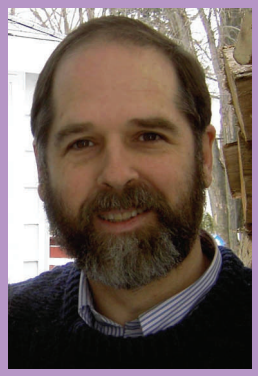

Joe Kelly—The Dad Man—is a father, speaker, writer, blogger, activist and consultant. He is the author of *Dads and Daughters: How to Inspire, Understand, and Support Your Daughter When She's Growing Up So Fast.**

Give the Gift of Time

Presence always trumps presents. More than any transient toy your kids crave time and attention, so let them bask in your presence. If you're a live-away parent, be with your child through personal communication and traditions, rather than trying to "make up" for your situation with a flood of presents.

Instead of the latest electronic gadget, give your child time (and be sure to keep the commitments you make). Here are a few examples:

- Take a simple trip together.
- Make a commitment to spend one hour of one-on-one time with her, once a week, all year (for dozens of great ideas, check out *The Dads & Daughters Togetherness Guide: 54 Fun Activities to Help Build a Great Relationship*).
- Make homemade decorations together and regale her with stories from your childhood holidays.
- Pick one day between now and the holidays to just watch her non-judgmentally all day. Just be aware of how unique and special she is. At the end of the day, write down everything you love about her and give her the list as a holiday gift.

The Joy of Giving and Sharing and Being Together

Before I became a parent, I read articles and books about how kids long for more time with parents, how they value traditions and family activities more than stuff, but I think on some level I was skeptical. While visiting friends or family members, I saw their young kids dive into their holiday present piles and they sure didn't look dissatisfied in the moment. I thought that cultivating a sense of appreciation for the non-stuff parts of the holidays with my own child would be hard, requiring great restraint.

It wasn't until I became a parent that I realized how wrong I was. It's really true – kids do love baking cookies and making handmade gifts to give away. Kids really do love sharing with others less fortunate, singing songs, having traditions that mark the passing of another year. Sure, they like the presents too – let's not kid ourselves – but they quickly learn for themselves how much more lasting the joy of giving and sharing and being together is.

When I ask my own daughter, now 10, what her favorite parts of the holidays are, she echoes those very articles I was skeptical of years ago: grandma visiting, our annual homemade cookie party, making decorations, gathering family around the dinner table, sharing, being together. This wasn't something I had to convince her of; in fact, she convinced me.

Annie Leonard, a mother and dedicated activist, is the creator and host of the internet film sensation "The Story of Stuff." Her book, *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff Is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health-and a Vision for Change* is due out in March of 2010.

*CCFC Steering Committee

Diane Levin, PhD, is Professor of Education at Wheelock College and co-founder of CCFC. She's a mother, co-author of *So Sexy So Soon* and co-founder of TRUCE.*

Gifts That Encourage Creative Play Beginning at Birth

For the past 15 years, I have worked with Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE), an organization of early childhood educators in the Boston area, preparing materials to help parents and schools deal with the impact of media and commercial culture on children. Each year, TRUCE has prepared the ***TRUCE Toy Action Guide*** for the December holiday season. This year TRUCE also has a brand new guide that we're very excited about.

We created the ***TRUCE Infant & Toddler Play, Toys & Media Action Guide*** because of our deep concern about the rapid escalation in marketing high tech toys and media to infants and toddlers. The guide clearly explains the problem and helps adults resist the baby marketing onslaught and promote quality play for their very young children.

The ***TRUCE Toy Action Guide*** provides information to help families make good decisions about quality toys to buy as gifts for children. Today there are so many toys linked to media and electronics that actually can undermine play and learning and promote violence and sexualization. The Toy Guide also includes recommendations for shoebox gifts, collections of small, familiar items that are organized around an appealing play theme such as bathtub play or rescue play. Shoebox gifts show that expensive toys in fancy packages aren't the only way to promote quality play.

Both of these action guides plus the "TRUCE Media Action Guide" are available for download at www.truceteachers.org. The materials are not copyrighted so you can reprint and use them as you wish.

TV-Free Holidays

All people seem to wish they had more time as the holidays approach. Between special events, cooking, shopping, wrapping, and traveling or preparing to host family and friends, the demands of the holidays can be overwhelming.

One way to tame the chaos and find more time is to turn off your TV. First, you'll find half hour increments of time you didn't know you had: thirty minutes after dinner to write a few holiday cards; fifteen minutes to read your favorite childhood story to your kids. Or even ten minutes to make some hot chocolate, relax, and read before bedtime or talk with your spouse.

Once you're free from the loud commercials, the non-stop "breaking news," and other clutter coming at you over the airwaves, you may also find increased peace of mind. It may take a few days to get used to the relative silence. If it seems too quiet at first, try listening to music.

How will the rest of your family react? They may protest at first, but use some of your newfound time to play a board game, play cards, work a puzzle with them, or bundle up and go for a walk. Even adolescents want to spend more time with their parents.

This holiday season, you deserve more than TV has to offer -- enjoy your family and friends without commercial interruption!

Karen Lewis is a mother, an activist, and Project Associate for the Tobacco Prevention Project, National School Boards Association.*

*CCFC Steering Committee

Susan Linn, EdD, is Director of CCFC. A mother and a grandmother, she is the author of *The Case for Make-Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World.*

Carving Out Time and Space for Commercial-Free Family Traditions

A good way to counter holiday commercialism is to build in holiday activities that are concrete expressions of their spiritual, cultural, and social meaning. Take some time for reading aloud stories from your cultural tradition, preparing traditional foods, and actively engaging children in giving, not just receiving. By shifting the family focus and energy away from holiday commercialism we can create traditions that children expect and look forward to each year.

From the time my daughter was two, we began making an annual trip to a grocery store to buy ingredients for a complete holiday dinner that we deliver to a local food pantry. It was always fun to choose the food, and the concrete experience of buying a meal for a family that can't afford it led to conversations about hunger, poverty, and thankfulness, that deepened and became more complex as she grew and developed.

Commercial-Free Holiday Links

Read CCFC Members' Commercial-Free Holiday Tips & Post Your Own:
http://commercialfreechildhood.org/blog/commercial-free-holiday-tips-ccfc-members

Download the TRUCE Toys, Play & Young Children Action Guide and the Infant & Toddler Play, Toys & Media Action Guide:
http://www.truceteachers.org/guides.htm

Download The Center for a New American Dream's "Simplify the Holidays" Guide:
http://www.newdream.org/programs/beyond-consumerism/simplify-holidays

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