

**I**t was a tradition in our family to make every Christmas morning more exciting for the kids than the year before," recalls Deborah Spaide of New Canaan, CT. "We wanted them to be thrilled when they opened their presents. But every year the kids just became cranky and overstimulated within a few hours. Eventually, we realized that we were sending the message that they needed a lot of *things* in order to have fun," says Spaide, a charity expert and author of *Teaching Your Kids to Care* (Replica Books, 1999).

Vowing to make things more meaningful, Spaide and her husband changed tactics: Instead of cleaning out the local Toys "R" Us, they devoted holiday funds to making a family memory (a cookie party for all their friends, a fun vacation); the family also voted on an annual charity to support.

Spaide's children still get a stocking filled with a few small presents, but more importantly, they also receive a gift they'll remember forever—spending quality time with their parents.

Making this shift toward a more spiritual, benevolent holiday season not only encourages family bonding, it prevents overindulgence—something Dr. Phil believes is one of the most

# MATERIAL BOYS AND GIRLS



When the holiday "gimmies" get out of control, consider strategies that offer richer rewards **by Hillary Quinn**

insidious forms of child abuse. "The greatest damage that's done when the focus is all about presents is that parents are teaching their children to be too self-involved," adds Spaide. "As adults, we know there's very little satisfaction in that." Here's how to keep from spoiling kids this time of year:

**Do provide for your children emotionally and spiritually.** Time spent together—a private lunch or movie date—can be more coveted than the latest plastic warrior.

**Don't send a competitive message.** Exposing your kids to a homeless shelter in order to make them feel lucky tells them that they've got it better. Instead, teach your kids to help out—and see what they have in common with those less fortunate.

**Do help them achieve internal rewards.** "The best gift you can give your child is an intrinsic sense of pride and accomplishment," says

Dr. Phil. They'll keep that long after the store-bought gifts fade.

**Don't define happiness by material wealth.** Rather than comparing what you have versus what the neighbors have, Dr. Phil recommends a one-on-one conversation with your child about what really defines one's worth: intelligence, creativity, caring, giving, and a solid work ethic.

## AVOIDING THE GIFT TRAP

### DOING UNTO OTHERS

"When my son was young, we started a Christmas ritual of gathering toys he'd outgrown and giving them to a local transitional home for women and children. After a few years, we 'adopted' a family from that home for the holidays; we are friends with them to this day."

—Frish Brandt, San Francisco

### SPIRITUAL SUSTENANCE

"We always took our children to a moving candlelight church service every Christmas Eve. That one magical hour provided a thoughtful respite from the materialism that often surrounds the season."

—Charlie Adams, Reading, PA

### OUT ON THE TOWN

"Instead of giving gifts, our extended family goes out to the theater to support the local arts community. This year, the 20 of us saw *The Lion King*."

—Karin Barnes, Seattle

### THE JOY OF GIVING

"We try to foster the excitement of watching *others* open presents by taking our 3-year-old shopping, letting her help wrap gifts, talking about how fun it will be when the person opens the present, and acting excited when we hand it over. So far, she continues to be joyful when presents are given—to her or to anyone else."

—Pam Kogut, Cambridge, MA