

The theme is:

THE GIFT OF GIVING

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SMA NEWS

By Dr London Lucien Ooi



The Spirit of Giving – And Not Giving In!

Christmas is here again! What better time than now to get into the spirit of giving? That is what shops have been telling us all this time and more. "Spend, spend more and then some more." "Buy for your loved ones and share the Spirit of Christmas." "After all, Christmas comes but once a year, plus that is what the year-end bonus and 13th month salary is for," say many.

My wife, Kathy, and I have a young family of three boys: Joshua (7^{1/2}), Daniel (5^{1/2}) and Samuel (1). As 'young' parents, like all other parents, providing for our brood is the most important. However, come every Christmas, we are faced with the dilemma of wanting to buy more toys and presents for the children, and wanting to teach them the true meaning of gifting. Of course, the massive pre-Christmas marketing by the shops, especially on children's prime time television does not help very much. Shops now even throw in 'meet-and-greet' your favourite cartoon character or super hero at special sessions to entice little shoppers.

And at school, children compare notes on what is the latest in Lego, Game Boy, X-Box, Barbie Dolls, Power Rangers, and what have you.

I am sure many of you will agree that as we get more affluent, it is easier to buy things for our children. Being doctors moves us into a professional earning bracket way above the national wage norm. If children from homes with a lower income bracket can afford expensive toys, surely we can provide more and better toys for our children. After all, what is \$20 for a toy figurine when that is what one charges for a consultation?

While the urge to provide materially for our children is an instinctive response, it can sometimes be clouded by other factors. As doctors, we sometimes lose track of time as we care for our patients, or if we are in double-income families, then both parents may not have the time to spend with the kids, and providing excessively materially may be a surrogate for less time spent with the kids. I myself have been guilty of this. Less often, the lack of time with the kids is because we



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parents spend time golfing, socialising and so on. Occasionally, it is simply because we cannot say ‘no’ to our kids.

Whatever the reason, giving toys or gifts excessively to children at a young age may teach them to place undue value on materialism and consumerism. As Christian parents, my wife and I had promised at our children’s infant baptisms to bring them up right, and part of that vow was to teach them to be caring and sharing, and to place their treasures in things above and not on material things here on earth. This need to bring our children up right, I am very sure, applies also to parents of all other religions. Which parent would not want the best for their child!

THE CHRISTMAS TEMPTATION

My wife and I find that we face the biggest problems with buying toys during the Christmas season. Christmas has become perhaps the biggest consumer festival in the world and the main reason for giving gifts, celebrated by all especially merchandisers. For non-Christians, it is a time of revelry, festivity, shopping and gifting. For Christians, it is a celebration of the birth of Christ, and a season of sharing and giving of love and happiness. But for young children, like ours, Christmas usually just means toys wrapped under a tree to be opened on the morning itself.

So how can we truly teach our kids the true spirit of sharing and giving when everywhere this season, they see things that teach them the spirit of buying and receiving? Here are just some ideas we have tried ourselves, and others I have learnt or borrowed from friends who also have young children.

LEARNING TO GIVE

It is natural for a child to want to hold on to his own. My wife and I frequently remark at how our 1-year-old Samuel who has just started

walking, will march up to another child who has approached his toy and take it back, claiming what is rightfully his. Samuel is not a selfish child and will generously share if asked to, but the natural instinct for any child is not to share, especially at that age. Many adults too have

not grown beyond this stage and sharing does not come naturally.

A few years ago at Christmas, my wife Kathy arranged, through her Christian ladies group, for us to help out at a Christmas party at the Salvation Army Home for children from less privileged families. It was interesting for Joshua and Daniel, who were 5 and 3 then, to see that not all children had whatever they wanted. Kathy had prepared them for the visit and the children had agreed to ‘contribute’ one



“The look of happiness on a little girl’s face when Joshua gave her his gift, and his enlightened shy smile, made us realise that the one who had the best gift that day was not the girl but Joshua who had received the gift of sharing.”

of their Christmas gifts for the party. Those of you with young children will know how difficult it is to take a toy away from a child, let alone ask him to give it away. At the Home, Joshua was full of questions like “Where are the children’s parents?”, “Are they here because they were naughty?”, “Why don’t they have toys?”. The best part of the party for the boys was when it was time to present their gifts to the children from the Home. The look of happiness on a little girl’s face when Joshua gave her his gift, and his enlightened shy smile, made us realise that the one who had the best gift that day was not the girl but Joshua who had received the gift of sharing.

Another practice we had instituted to help teach the concept of giving was for the children to consider other kids whenever they wanted to buy something or had received a present. The domestic helpers who have lived with us were always encouraged to share with the boys stories about their own children back in Indonesia or Philippines and their lifestyles there.

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*Dr London Ooi
with his wife Kathy
and their three boys.*



Understanding and hearing how little other children had in poorer countries made it easier for both Joshua and Daniel to include little ‘presents’ for the children of their ‘aunties’ whenever they

sent a box of clothes or things home.

TEACHING THE VALUE OF SIMPLE THINGS

In my young days, which I like to think was not too long ago, catching spiders, skipping with rope made from rubber bands strung together, and playing homemade ‘five stones’ were a great thing. I remember in school how much spiders were prized items and trophies to be collected and compared. Most kids then played with things they found from the world around them or made themselves.

Today, however, I am amazed at what the ‘basic’ level of toys and games are for kids. It seems the current minimum for a girl is a complete Barbie Doll set, and for a boy, a hand-held computer game like Game Boy.

My family and I have thankfully been blessed with a lovely home in the east where we can enjoy the simpler things in life. The closeness to nature allows the children to just walk out from the gates and chase wild chickens and 2-foot-long monitor lizards. Yes, such places still exist in Singapore if you look hard enough. Occasionally we make the trip to one of the parks in the nature reserves, or to the beach, which is only a 5-minute drive away. ‘Treasures’ collected from around the house or on these field trips take pride of place in the children’s ‘treasure chest’ – a \$4 Ikea plastic container. These items also come in handy when the boys make their own toys and gifts for friends. With a little imagination and plenty of encouragement from parents, even a simple feather can be a treasure worth more to a 7-year-old than an expensive toy figurine.

Dr London Lucien Ooi, MBBS (NUS), MD (NUS), FRCSEd, FRCSG, FAMS, is a Surgical Oncologist at the National Cancer Centre.

ENCOURAGING SHARING AND COOPERATION

Having said all that, it is difficult, if not impossible, in this day and age of affluent Singapore for children not to have toys. However, there are toys and there are toys, and as parents, it is important that we learn to be selective in the choice of gifts for our children. My wife Kathy and I have had long and frequent discussions on what toys are suitable to buy for the kids. Toys that encourage creativity and freedom of ideas like Lego or Megablocks are my favourites. Games like Scrabble or Boggle have educational value, and certainly help if you want your child to ace spelling tests. Definite no-nos for us are toys that encourage violence or explore witchcraft and the unnatural, like Yu-gi-oh trading cards for example.

Some toys and games are great to encourage sharing or teach cooperation. Although X-Box is usually thought to encourage violent behaviour because of the fighting games, selected ones like Shrek which allow multiple players can be quite good teaching tools. I use these sessions to teach the boys to cooperate by using their game characters to work together towards achieving tasks. It is very easy for a 7 and 5-year old to see that if the characters Fiona and Shrek went separate ways, there was no way they were going to rescue the three blind mice from the cages. On a more down-to-earth level, sharing skills can also be taught by activities like kite-flying where it takes two to launch, and these are certainly great gifts for friends as it brings them outdoors away from the stifle of indoor games and computers.

THE RIGHT SPIRIT

As Christmas approaches again this year, Kathy and I are indeed thankful that we have been blessed with children who understand sharing. As in previous Christmases, Joshua and Daniel will be actively helping us look for gifts for their friends, and maybe even make something personal as we did one year. We are pleased that they do not ask for gifts for themselves. Samuel, I am sure, will be the same when he grows up. For the Ooi’s, this coming Christmas will definitely be a time of sharing and caring, just like in all Christmases past. And the gifts our children will get under the Christmas tree will be real presents given with love from family and friends, not things bought by demands and threats. Certainly, teaching the ‘spirit of giving’ and adopting the ‘spirit of not giving in’ have blessed our family. ■