



Presence, Not Presents

It is that time of year again! Yes, the time of the year when I can barely leave the house for fear of going insane from all the advertising of worthless garbage targeted at children and the parents who love them. The underlying message to parents is buy them everything they want or supposedly “need” this holiday, or they will feel unloved. As a specialist in early childhood education, this both breaks my heart and gets my blood boiling! Parents are made to feel that if they don’t keep up with the Toys ‘R’ Us mom with her basket full of “educational” computers, movies, video games, and other plastic stuff, that they somehow love their children less, or will be setting them up for failure down the road. Every December, well-meaning parents do more harm than good by purchasing the latest and greatest in the name of their children’s happiness and educational development.

While the above description is a pretty “bah humbug,” it is unfortunately accurate. I only have my voice and this article to express what is truly appropriate and worthwhile for young children, while toy companies have billions at their disposal to convince well-intentioned parents of the exact opposite.

Most families in Huntington Beach are fortunate to afford a multitude of gifts for their children during the holidays. What I see happening though, is that our ability to afford them leads to five, 10, or even 20 presents left under the tree for each child. How have toy companies managed to commercialize childhood and the holidays? When did parents begin to listen more to hype than their hearts? In addition to the mere fact that children need nothing (if you don’t believe me, go look in their rooms) and that we are teaching them materialism, these toys are typically not beneficial to them either.

Young children learn through doing, through hands on involvement with their world. They learn more from simply mixing flour and water than from a computer toy that belts out “Good Job” every time the child pushes the correct letter. That old saying that the child will play longer with the box than the toy that came in it has wisdom behind it. Just because a child begs for that certain toy, does not mean they will benefit from receiving it. While it is natural for parents to want to see their children happy, we owe it to our children to consider the costs of this instant, material gratification. Think about how many times they picked up the last toy you bought them lately and then put your wallet away. Think about how many things you bought them in November and put your wallet away.

Now many will not be satisfied with giving children just time, attention, and love this holiday season, so here is what I propose instead. Give them one meaningful gift that they will truly cherish. If they love horses, buy them riding lessons. If they love dinosaurs, find the greatest encyclopedia of dinosaur information in exist-



tence, and avoid the Jurassic Park or Land Before Time movies. If they love to cook with you, buy them their own real utensils or baking ingredients rather than the unusable plastic play-kitchen. In addition, consider where this toy purchase will be in 25 years. If the landfill springs to mind, think twice. If it is something that can be passed down for generations, then it might be worth pulling your wallet back out. If it has more packaging than toy it is probably not a good purchase since toy companies with a lack of care for the environment usually care more about making money than a child’s developmental benefit. If it cannot be used for more than one thing, it is probably not worth your child’s time. Toys should be 90 percent child and only 10 percent toy. It allows their imaginations to flourish and their creativity to lead the play.

Most importantly, remember traditions and make the time to spend with your children. I guarantee that years from now, they will not remember which rescue hero they got this Christmas or Chanukah. They will remember that every year, they read the same story next to the warm fire before going to bed. They will remember the smell of the foods that your family prepares. They will remember the songs we sing. The visits to grandparents where they got to play with all their cousins will be cherished. These are the truly important gifts we can give them. **HB**

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