

Overcoming Over-gifting

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Christian parents often struggle with ways to keep their children from becoming “spoiled” by material possessions. They recognize the danger of fostering a tendency toward greed, and are careful not to feed this dangerous appetite of the flesh. So, they carefully limit toys, clothes, and other possessions; they encourage giving away possessions, as well as joyful sharing with siblings and playmates, and being happy for siblings who receive nice things; they regularly say “no,” and they correct attitudes of complaining and discontentment through appropriate discipline. It is a constant battle, particularly in wealthy and materialistic Western cultures where money and possessions are given an overly-exalted status.



Despite their best efforts, however, many parents find themselves facing an unexpected and unwitting enemy—generous and well-meaning relatives who are able, and more than willing, to provide a steady flow of goodies and gifts for the grandkids, nieces and nephews. In this way, birthdays and Christmas are often turned into feeding frenzies for their children’s inherently covetous hearts. Siblings’ birthdays, which provide opportunities for jealousy and disappointment at seeing others receive gifts, also become opportunities for well-meaning relatives to provide “consolation gifts” for the one whose birthday it is not. Even routine visits by grandparents and other relatives become eagerly anticipated, more on account of the “just because” gifts than the givers who like to bring them.

Parents rightly estimate these gift-giving relationships as challenges, and sometimes obvious setbacks, with respect to their biblical child-training philosophy, but what can they do about it? How are they to resist these friendly and generous “enemies” as they strive to teach their children to heed Jesus’ warning in Luke 12:15—“Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions”—or Hebrews 13:5—“Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have”?

There may be other effective approaches, but one excellent suggestion came from a young couple I know. They thoughtfully and graciously confronted the issue head-on by sending out the following group text:

Dear grandmas and grandpas, aunts, uncles and cousins . . .

We would like to make a couple of requests. We would like to implement a few principles for our family and we would like your help.

We are daily fighting a battle in our home against a worldly mentality—a love of “stuff,” a desire for “more and more,” and a sense of entitlement. Because of this, we would like to ask that you give our children (and us!) only ONE gift for birthdays and Christmas. While we don’t mean it has to physically be one item (it could be a set of books, a nice outfit, shoes, a coloring set, etc.), we don’t want for it to be a giant bag stuffed full of gifts or something huge and expensive. We’d like it to just be something simple and meaningful, something you know that person will enjoy and appreciate. We intend to follow this same principle when giving gifts to you all as well.

In keeping with this we need to also ask that you please not bring a gift for our children when you come to our house on other occasions. (Items like clothes or books are still welcome, but we would appreciate if you talked with us first to see if there is a need, and then give the items to one of us instead of “gifting” them to the kids). We want our children to love your visits for you! We certainly don’t mind if you bring a snack and a few books to read together, but we want the emphasis to be on enjoying each other’s company and allowing our kids to know and love you for you, not for what you bring them.

We’d also like to ask that no one bring a gift for the “left out” child at birthdays. We have found this to be unhelpful as we are trying to teach that child contentment and joy at their siblings’ “blessings.”

We love you all and are extremely grateful for your constant generosity! We aren’t upset at anyone! We just decided that we need to do this for our family’s sake. We sincerely desire that our children learn that true satisfaction is found only in Christ.

We are happy to explain more if anyone would like more details! We also really appreciate being asked if anyone has a question about a gift. We hope you understand and that this doesn’t cause you any trouble.

We love you all!