



## KIDS' HEALTH

# Present Tense

UNWRAP THE MEANING BEHIND GIFT-GIVING AND FIND OUT HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH

By **Lauren Paige Kennedy**

Intuitively, parents know what happens when they overindulge their children with too much *stuff*. Yet while many parents steadfastly resist their kids' constant pleas for toys, digital devices, and smartphone apps during much of the year, they feel pressured to deluge their progeny with presents during the holiday season.

Is all this gifting good for kids? Can there be negative consequences?

It all depends on the motivation behind the presents, says Seema Desai, MD, board-certified psychiatrist and assistant clinical professor in the departments of child, adolescent, and adult psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine.

"In our culture, the holidays are a time for celebration, tradition, and, yes, gift-giving," Desai says. "What's important is for parents to reconnect with their own values, and to

### HAPPY TALK

Not only do kids develop better coping skills when they're not overindulged—they're happier, too, according to a recent *Children's Worlds* study that surveyed children across 15 countries, rich and poor. Some highlights from the study:

**Kids are happy, even without "stuff":** Kids ages 8 to 14 were asked whether they had access to nine things (good clothes, a computer, the Internet, a mobile phone, their own room, books, a family car, a music player, and a TV) and about how happy they felt. Relative happiness was very high among all the children, with poorer Romanian children the happiest of all. Wealthier English kids ranked lower: 13 out of 15.

**...but the grownups aren't:** Interestingly, when the adults in these same countries were similarly polled, a direct correlation between material possessions and happiness occurred. Wealthy Norway ranked the highest with life satisfaction; impoverished Ethiopia ranked last.

understand what brings *them* happiness. Gift-giving should not be fueled through a sense of guilt or obligation—or manipulation on the part of the kid. It's really important that it comes from a place of compassion and generosity. The same series of gifts with different motivations have different effects—and these motivations can affect the outcome for the child, too."

In other words, bombarding a child with presents to make her happy during this festive season without any larger connection to something meaningful—spiritual or otherwise—may leave both giver and receiver feeling empty. Desai is a big believer in rewarding kids with gifts that leave a sense of accomplishment or are tied to a greater achievement. She encourages parents to help their kids engage in "social activities that cultivate kindness, gratitude, service, and generosity and foster a sense of connection and meaning."

She also advises linking gifts, as much as possible, with positive behaviors—and reminds parents that a little deprivation can be a good thing.

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