

The Perfect Gift for Your Child

This is the time of year when most parents are searching for that special gift for their child. Those special gifts that will light up the child's face and satisfy everyone's expectations of the perfect gift on Christmas morning. Some parents go shopping in the middle of the night, travel many miles in search of the perfect gift, or spend hours on-line tracking down the perfect gift when all the time the perfect gift is right there, right at the tips of your fingers and ready to give at all times.

The perfect gift your child wants, not only this time of year, but all year long, is YOU. For many parents and adults this is the hardest gift for them to give. We live in a world that has lost family mealtime, story time, sharing time, I care time. The perfect gift for your child is your gift of time together, playing, talking, and sharing a meal, a smile, a song, a laugh, and a time together with you.

We all have a few imperfections when it comes to parenting skills and the ability to be a good parent to our children. It's hard to turn off the game, get down on the floor and play, or get out of the chair and go for a walk and have a talk with the kids. A cell phone may appear to be an easier gift that lets them text-message others, but in the long term what they really want is the gift of your time and messages from you. Messages that say I care about you and I love you. The number one thing a parent should be concerned is the perception of caring their child has of how much does their parent care about them. The holidays are prime time to increase your child's sense of how much you care. Sure the presents help, but you spending time with them will greatly increase their perception of how much you care and love them.

Now that I have grandchildren I say to folks "I should have had the grandchildren first." I think I know what I'm doing. That "doing" is taking time with the kids and letting them know how much you care about them. Sure the wrapped presents are nice and they meet a need in all of us, but the biggest needs of a child are times with caring adults. Mom and Dad take time this holiday season to talk with your child, tell those stories of your holidays as a child, and ask them what is special and what they like about the holidays. Take time this holiday season to share the wonderful gift you have of being a family.

Raising children is something we learn as we go and the holidays can be a wonderful time to learn. We apply many of the parenting skills we observed from our parent(s) and some of those parenting skills may work today and some may not.

What I have discovered is there are important components in the life of a child that will enhance the child reaching young adulthood as a competent and caring individual. There are essential elements a child must experience to become a young adult who feels good about them self and who can reach out and support positive development in other people.

The first essential element a child must have is a sense of belonging. From the day a child is born it is essential that child develops an awareness they are loved and belong to people who care about them and they begin to build a sense of support through their family. I've heard people say "don't hold that baby so much, you will spoil them." Now that I'm a grandfather I realize holding them doesn't spoil them.

I would encourage you as much as you can this holiday season to give your child that perfect gift, the gift of your time. Take time to talk with them, hold them, and as they grow let them know they are loved and they will develop that wonderful sense of belonging.

Later in life your child may have a hard time remembering what was in the packages or what gifts they received in 2010, but I can promise you they will always remember your gift of taking time with them. The memories they will have of the stories, the music, watching movies together, wrapping presents, delivering can goods to the food banks, playing games, and the times together, that perfect gift that will last a lifetime.

Doug Hovatter is a WVU Associate Professor and 4-H Agent in Berkeley County. He can be reached at 304 264-1936 or Doug.Hovatter@Mail.WVU.edu