

PARENT TIMES



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Happy Holidays!

It's the most wonderful time of the year...the days are shorter, the nights are cooler and there doesn't seem to be enough time to cross everything off of our to-do lists!

In the midst of all the hustle and bustle, it is nice to take a step back and learn a thing or two from our children. If you are able to spend a moment completely lost in "their world," being mindful and present with your interaction, we are sure you won't regret it. The laughter, excitement and wonder of a child during the holiday season is contagious and refreshing. Children can remind us to keep things simple, that bigger isn't always better and that time spent together is the best gift of all.



We were all brought together by the gift of motherhood. Without our children, we would not be a part of NCPG or each other's lives. May we all cherish this very special gift!

As this busy holiday season gets underway, let us all take a moment to recognize the many blessings in our lives and appreciate the time spent celebrating with our friends and family. Enjoy the special moments and traditions that will be remembered forever.

See you next year!

Jen Burns and Melissa Eustice

dreaming of a
white christmas?

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My Kids Have Too Many Toys

Why The Holidays Make Me Overspend.

By Kristen Stiefel Levithan | www.babble.com



My kids are in a playgroup. Friday mornings find us piling into the minivan, driving across town, and spilling out – leaky sippy cups, travel mug of now lukewarm coffee, exploding diaper bag, and all – into the homes of our friends. In these homes, as in ours, there is a room (at least one) dedicated to the accoutrement of childhood. Piles upon piles of toys. An orgy of toys. Riding toys, climbing toys, small toys, large toys, plastic toys in every possible color not found in nature. A Toys “R” Us gone supernova in a basement.

Sometimes at playgroup, when I’m alone in my head, I watch the toddlers at play and think about my own childhood. I remember playing in the woods behind my parents’ house. Shooting baskets in our driveway. Riding my Big Wheel up and then roaring down the short hill of our suburban cul-de-sac. Building forts out of sleeping bags and a threadbare La-Z-Boy recliner. Setting up domino rallies. Doing puzzles. Playing Twister, Sorry, and The Game of Life. Reading.

I don’t have memories of toys.

We had toys, of course – probably more of them than my parents appreciated stepping on barefoot when making their way through our family room, but their specific contours don’t resolve when I look backward.

And I find myself wondering: How did we come to believe that our children need so many things?

I will not pretend that my own house does not suffer from an overabundance of electronic trinkets and colorful trifles. It does. I have not held the line against the onslaught of items. But my kids, like most kids I know, are often more discerning than the adults charged with their care. They spend plenty of time with their beloved Thomas train set, their miniature kitchen, and their Legos. But their favorite playthings also include a box with a handle (a “suitcase”), a paper towel roll (a “telescope”), and a Q-tip (“I’m cleaning for you, Mommy”). Yesterday my two-year-old occupied himself for twenty minutes “mowing the lawn” with a long-handled shoehorn.

Children have the ability to make the extraordinary out of the ordinary. But it’s wrong, I think, to expect them to make the extraordinary when the ordinary is preprocessed, prefabricated, and prepackaged, and the imagination is pre-provided. Yet I find that I am often the one forgetting this lesson, flipping through the latest toy catalog to hit the mailbox, wondering what shiny bauble I might add to our collection.

As I walked through our local big box store last weekend, I could already see the twinkle of Christmas lights edging out the Halloween costumes. Soon, I suspect, an animatronic Santa Claus will displace the giant inflatable pumpkin at the store’s entrance. And I know myself: When I head back there a month from now and stroll down the toy aisle while listening to a Muzak version of “Silver Bells” being piped in over the loudspeaker, I will be tempted. After all, what harm would it do? A glow-in-the-dark Lightsaber for my oldest. More Legos for my toddler. A plush penguin – so cute! – for my baby girl.

But I hope that I’ll pause before I buy, thinking back for a moment to the sleeping bag fort of my childhood and to my son’s shoehorn lawnmower. I hope that I’ll resist the urge to clutter our lives with more stuff. I hope that I’ll take the time to ask myself what I am really trying to buy when I give my kids things they don’t need, things they haven’t even asked for.

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NCPG is a non-profit, non-denominational organization providing classes to parents of infant to pre-school age children.

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Announcements

- No More Classes in December!

Relax or plan a playdate with your fellow classmates!

- Classes Resume:

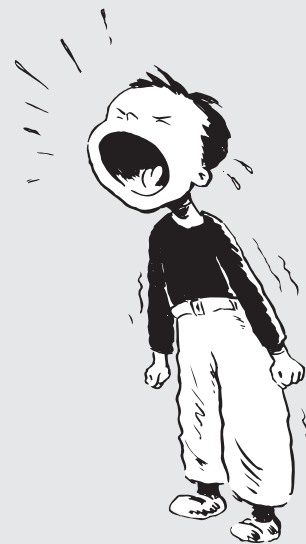
- Day Class - January 11th
- Evening Class - January 4th

- Online Teacher Survey

Thank you for taking the anonymous online teacher survey. *It was our best turnout yet!*

- Crews'n Healthmobile Donations Were a Great Success!

Thanks to everyone who brought in donations for Crews'n Healthmobile!



Candy Cane Playdough

Make two batches one red and one white. (See attached play clay recipe) After the clay cools knead in some glitter for holiday glitziness and some peppermint essential oil (about 10 drops each batch) for the candy cane scent. Gather clay and roll into snake-like portions, then twist one red and white together like a candy cane. Place each twist into a jar and add fabric, lids and labels. Voila... candy cane play clay!



Ingredients

- 5 cups water
- 5 cups flour
- 2 1/2 cups salt
- 3 Tablespoons cream of tartar
- 10 Tablespoons vegetable oil
- Food coloring

Directions

1. Mix water, salt, cream of tartar, and food coloring.
2. Cook on low heat, stirring regularly.
3. Add oil, then flour.
4. Stir until play clay pulls away from pan and is no longer sticky.
5. Dump clay on counter.
6. Let cool a bit,
7. Then, knead!

Too Much Praise is No Good for Toddlers

By Jenny Anderson | www.nytimes.com



When I was 8, my mom gave me a self-esteem bear. It told me I was great.

So I could relate to the recent *New York Magazine* article called “The Kids Are Actually Sort of Alright.” It’s a thoughtful millennials’ manifesto, written by one, which examines, among other things, existing in a chilly world after a childhood of warm and bountiful praise.

The writer, Noreen Malone, quotes Lael Goodman, 27, who says: “The worst thing is that I’ve always gotten self-worth from performance, especially good grades. But now that I can’t get a job, I feel worthless.”

This is precisely the problem with praise, or at least praise aimed at performance. It’s like crack for kids: Once they get, they need it, and they want more. And the real world doesn’t praise them for getting dressed in the morning.

Now, new research shows that too much praise for children as young as 1 to 3 can have negative repercussions down the road. (How did I spend my morning? Cheering on my 1-year old for the triangles she was putting into the triangle slots, and lauding my 3-year-old for clearing her plate.)

It was done by Carol Dweck, a Stanford researcher, who has been studying children’s coping and resilience mechanisms for 40 years. For the last 14 of them, she’s focused on what she suspects is the culprit behind less resilient children: Praise.

Her latest research is “Parent Praise,” and it’s a longitudinal study. In it, researchers observed, and coded, praise from parents with children 14 months old to 38 months old to see if it was more person-based (“you are really smart”) or process based (“you must have tried really hard”). When the kids were 7 and 8, they checked back to see how they felt about taking risks and whether qualities like intelligence were fixed or malleable.

The process kids won.

“The parents who gave more process-praise had children who believe their intelligence and social qualities could be developed and they were more eager for challenges,” Dr. Dweck told me.

In her previous research, she’s showed that praising children for their intelligence or abilities often undermines motivation and hurts performance. Kids who are told they are smart care more about performance goals and less about learning. Kids praised for their efforts believe that trying hard, not being smart, matters. These kids are “resilient” and take more risks.

Consider this study, which she did variations on for years. Researchers give two groups of fifth graders easy tests. Group one is told they got the questions right because they are smart. Group two is told they got the questions right because they tried hard. Then they give the kids take a harder test, one designed to be far above their ability. Turns out the “smart” kids don’t like the test and don’t want to do more. The “effort” kids think they need to try harder and welcome the chance to try again. The researchers give them a third test, another easy one. The “smart” kids struggle, and perform worse than they did on the first test (which was equally easy). The “effort” kids outperform their first test, and outperform their “smart” peers.

“If your whole goal is to look smart, you can’t enjoy something when you are not looking smart,” Dr. Dweck told me.

Here’s the scary part. In one variation of the study, the researchers tell the kids they’re going to give the same test at another school. They ask them to write a note to students in the other school telling them how they scored. Forty percent of the “smart” kids lie about their results, compared with 10 to 12 percent of the “effort” kids.

While I’d put my husband and me into the praise-prone category, we have friends who take a more measured approach. They want their kids do things for the intrinsic joy of doing them, not because they want approval.

So when their daughter gets herself dressed and looks for praise, her mom uses an encouraging tone but careful words. “You got yourself dressed!” When the girl finishes her dinner and looks for a gold star, her dad says, “Looks like you were hungry!” These people love their kids as much as I love mine. But they don’t congratulate them for showing up. Maybe they are onto something.

But then there’s Ms. Malone, the *New York Magazine* writer. She concludes that her generation is more resilient than people think. Their values are different from those of their parents. They are less materialistic and more creative. They like making ukuleles and meditating, and by her account, they’ll be just fine.

"Gimme, Gimme!" -v- Doing Good

Teaching Children to Give by Cynthia Ewer, Editor, *Organized Christmas*

Recently, I eavesdropped on an online discussion about teaching children to give.

The original writer was a concerned, conscientious parent of a preschooler. This father shared his plan to teach his daughter about holiday giving. They would, he wrote, sort through the child's toys and set aside several toys "to give to needy children."

An admirable effort, I thought--until he set forth the rest. He hoped to locate a charitable agency that would permit his daughter to hand her toys directly to the child who would receive them. This way, he felt, his child would learn what giving meant in a direct and unambiguous manner.

I stared at the computer terminal and asked "What is wrong with this picture?"

Over the next few days, I argued with myself. "How can you criticize a parent who wants to teach a young child to give?" I asked. "So many parents don't teach that lesson!" Still, I couldn't help thinking about what this "lesson" would mean to the other child involved--and what it said about children, charity, and giving.

As others chimed in the discussion, I eagerly read their replies. Most praised the proposed plan--including the direct hand-off. One woman after mine own heart did remind this father to choose donated toys carefully, making sure they were complete, in good condition, and wouldn't pose a safety hazard to another child.

But nobody said what I wanted to say.

Giving with Grace

Seems to me that this father's method, however laudable, falls short in a very important way. Giving is not about toys, things, or possessions. Giving, or at least, the kind of giving I want to teach my children to do, is about grace.

"Grace", in Christian terms, is the ultimate gift. It is something given freely, not earned. It has no ulterior motive. It is selfless. It cannot be bought or bargained for by the recipient. Grace is a force more powerful and more loving than any feeble human emotion, need or want.

Grace lies at the heart of every true gift. If grace is present, the humblest gift warms and ennobles, creates and expresses love. Without grace, even the costliest gift is cold and heartless.

But you can't give with grace if you're thinking of yourself first! Or if your gift comes with strings attached, or sends a mixed message to the recipient. There's no grace in the coerced gift, the I-don't-want-to-but-it's-expected gift, the gift that is designed to nudge the recipient in some vital way

When we ask our children to give, do we teach them to give with grace? Or is it merely, as it seems to be for this family, a learning experience purchased with old toys--without the slightest thought for the comfort, the embarrassment, the feelings of the other child to the transaction?

How do we teach our children to give? To give in the spirit of grace, to reflect the love which has been poured out so generously upon us?

Give Year-round

First, we need to bring giving into our lives all year long. During the holiday season, it is easy to share our good fortune. Food drives, bell ringers, charity functions help us remember the needs of others.

People are hungry the other 364 days of the year! Do our children see us model charity and giving from January through November? If not, what message are we sending them: that hunger and pain and misery only exist at Christmas? That we should only respond to this need only at Christmas time?

Make Giving Real

Second, we need to make giving real to our children. Best strategy: get them involved.

One effective method for school-aged children is the popular Angel Tree ministry or similar outreach efforts sponsored by many churches and charitable organizations. A family sponsors a child of designated age and sex, buying gifts and clothing for delivery by the charity.

When my children were younger, our family sponsored youngsters of the same ages. My children did the shopping for our "angels". It makes giving very, very real when a child chooses to buy his angel the radio-controlled car he hopes to find under his own tree! Do take a picture of the

wrapped "angel" gifts and the young givers. Your children will not forget that shopping trip.

Now that my children are older, our family focuses on the age group that languishes on the tree: teenagers. Everybody loves to buy toys for a three-year-old, but needy teens need love, too--and hats and scarves and hand-held video games. Explain to your children why you have chosen those last few forlorn tags. They will understand the love you express when you make sure that even no-longer-cuddly children have a holiday gift, too.

Give in Secret

Third, make sure your right hand doesn't know what your left hand is doing. Jesus, a great teacher, exposed the fallacy of the ostentatious giver, whose abundant charity depends upon whether anyone is watching.

Give in secret, and tell your children why: it is no gift when we expect gratitude, appreciation, or attach strings to our offerings. We give, instead, to relieve need; to share the abundance with which we've been blessed; and to reflect to others the good that we find in the world. Giving with grace is reward enough!

A few Christmases ago, I roped my eldest child, then 14, into a left hand/right hand deal. I was coordinating a church food box program for 120 families and a toy drive for homeless children. My giving time and my giving dollars were stretched as far as they could go.

Then I met a family that challenged me to give more. There were eight children all told, and two single mothers living on the edge. I felt burdened to see to it that they received more than the standard turkey dinner provided by our food box program.

My daughter and I put our heads together. Could we shop very carefully with our Advent money, and somehow find a way to bring Christmas to this family?

We could, and we did. We checked the sale flyers and found a sale on the types of toys we wanted. A neighbor (of limited means, himself) heard of our challenge, and contributed \$20 on the spot. We tightened the belt on our grocery budget, and found a way to send gifts for all and some much-needed cash to this family.

But we never met them. We never burdened them with our need for praise, for thanks, for appreciation. We packed everything into a box and saw to it that it was delivered along with their food basket.

My child and I remember that Christmas as one of our most joyous. Our gift was not thanks or gratitude or "aren't-you-wonderful!" Our gift was knowing that somewhere in our city, eight children were enjoying new toys, and two burdened mothers had their loads lifted, just a bit, when they didn't expect it. In a word, grace--but we were the recipients of the blessing.

Allow Your Children to Sacrifice

Finally, give your children the chance to experience sacrifice in order to give. Even a small sacrifice on their part will reinforce a lesson on giving more than any other factor.

Our family's Advent traditions focus on sacrifice. Each of us chooses an Advent discipline: some act or duty that will save money in our household. Even a three-year-old can be "light monitor"; turning off the household lights when no one is in the room. My eldest, the year she was eight, chose to make my lunch each day (and her offerings both saved money and helped me lose weight!).

Parents choose a discipline, too, like giving up lunches out. The entire family can agree to give up dessert or forego movie rentals in Advent as a family discipline.

In the center of our Advent wreath, we keep a little jar. Each night at dinner, we light the Advent candles and report in on our discipline. Has the light monitor turned off the lights? A quarter goes in the jar. Did Mommy eat her peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich instead of a restaurant lunch? That's another \$. As Advent progresses, the jar fills with the tangible results of our sacrifices. This fund pays for our holiday giving.

To make the lesson real, let the children take the whole jar--pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and all--to the store to pay for the "angel" gifts. Each coin stands for one small act of sacrifice, one little selfless step to help others. Salesmen will cringe when they see you coming, but your children will see the direct connection between their little sacrifices and their ability to give.

And they'll do it without having to hand an old toy to another child.





Mix It Up!

The Value of Having Mixed-Age Play

By Kathy Rowe, M.A. in Music Education
Center Director of Music Together in Phoenix

Imagine a group of children getting together to play. . . Are the children in your mind mostly about the same age? Or, are there children of different ages mixed together? I am guessing that most people conjure up the first image. Unless you have a large family or extended family nearby, it is often more common to see same-age play as opposed to mixing it up. There has been much recent evidence on the value of MIXING IT UP!

From a recent blog Freedom to Learn in “Psychology Today”, Peter Gray shares that mixed-age play is valuable in the zone of proximal development (or “the realm of activities that a child can accomplish in collaboration with more skilled others but cannot accomplish alone or with others at their same age”). This makes sense if we think about an 8-year-old playing ball with a four-year-old. While two 4-year-old children would probably get discouraged trying to pass a ball back and forth; it could be a fun challenge for an 8-year-old to catch the erratic throws of a 4-year-old. In a mixed age Music Together class, the toddlers often ogle or imitate the sassy dance moves of an energetic 4-year-old. The older child also has the benefit of being able to be a leader in class.

Mixed age play happens easily in a big family or in a family with lots of cousins living close by. This was not the case for my family when my children were younger and we were living in Chicago. Going to the park seemed like the place to find lots of different ages children. We also found Music Together classes. One of the things that attracted my family to this program, aside from the crazy fun music, was the fact that I could bring both my daughters to the same class. I couldn’t imagine the time or the resources of securing a babysitter for one child to take the other for music and then repeating this for our second child. I really loved that it was both fun and developmentally appropriate for both children!

While we occasionally face challenges of helping everyone feel comfortable with active preschool children and sweet cooing infants mixed together, the benefits are still huge! Here are a few reasons we love mixed-age classes:

Less comparing. When children are grouped together by age, it is inevitable for adults to notice differences in what they see each child doing. Some parents might worry, “why isn’t my child bouncing to the beat yet?” or “why can’t my child sing bum-bum like all the other two-year-olds?”. There is a huge variance for “normal development” in a child’s musical growth.

Just as the early walking child does not relate to being a gifted mover as a teen, achieving basic music competence as a three-year-old also doesn’t mean the child is Mozart. It is vital to trust that all children are musical, and, if their musical atmosphere is rich and supported, all children can arrive at basic music competence.

Natural learning. Without performance pressures, learning can happen in a very natural way. Children get to go through their primary rhythm and tonal development at their own pace without being rushed to keep up with peers.

Role-model supported. The mixed-age setting provides a rich learning environment because children of different ages thrive when they interact with each other. Older children in class, if they choose, may play a leadership role such as how to play their sticks, which animal to sing about and they often enjoy helping/sharing with the younger children. Babies are often fascinated by watching the older children make music.

Family-style learning. Families are able to bring one or more siblings together to the same class that is developmentally appropriate for both children. We had an amazing mom come last semester with triplet infants and her almost 3-year-old! She often brought a helper along, but had come solo on more than one occasion!! Daddies, grandmas, and older siblings may come along to share in the joy of making music together. This creates very strong family bonds and beautiful music memories to last for years.

If you are still not convinced that a 3-year-old can prosper if surrounded by toddlers, read more by googling “value of mixed age play” to find a wealth of articles, old and new on research findings in this area. A true mixed-age class, with a few babies, a handful of toddlers, and a smattering of preschool age children is my favorite class to teach and can be an amazingly rich environment for all children to thrive!



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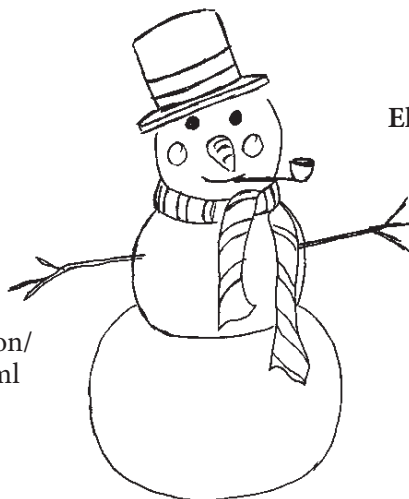
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Jar Luminarias

by Debra Immergut
 photograph by Ed Judice
familyfun.go.com

This perfect-for-any-age project uses glass jars to give a warm glow to your entry or mantel. You can punch letters, a snowflake pattern, or any other festive design.

Materials

- a clean, dry glass jar
- aluminum foil
- foam tray for work surface
- pen or toothpick
- tape
- tea light

Instructions

1. To make each lantern, clean and dry a glass jar. Measure and cut a piece of aluminum foil to fit around it with a bit of overlap.
2. Lay the foil on a meat tray or other foam tray, then use a pen or toothpick to pierce holes through the foil to create a design or letter. (If desired, you can use a toothpick to lightly score the design or letter on the foil first, then pierce holes along the guidelines.)
3. Carefully wrap the foil around the jar and tape it. Place a tea light inside.



Claus Cupcakes

Frost the cupcake with a layer of white icing.

Add the red frosting hat, curving it around the side of Santa's face

Add a marshmallow pom-pom.

Sprinkle on a ring of coconut to make Santa's beard and hair.

Draw on his eyes and cheeks with gel icing.

Then top it all off with a red candy nose.

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Easy Kids Crafts: Spoon Friends

Make some beautiful wooden friends.

These fun-to-paint wooden spoon friends were inspired by Alexander Girard's beautiful wooden dolls that he handmade for his family in 1963.



1

Trace a wooden spoon on scrap paper. Add stripes and facial expressions to your drawing. Use this as your template.

Working from the top down, mask off your stripes with painter's tape and paint. Let dry and remove tape.

2



3

Complete your spoon dolls by painting a face on each and maybe add a bow tie too.

4

Make a display for your dolls out of a shoe box painted in your favorite colors.



5

Ask an adult to cut Xs with a sharp knife where you want your dolls to stand. After playing with a spoon friend, push its handles through the X as shown at top!

