

Teaching Your Child to Give

by Bruce Costa

We all know that Christmas isn't just about receiving gifts. This is true of other holidays celebrated by loving families at this time of year, too. We all share the desire to raise warm and generous children who, as adults, can contribute to a better world. But teaching generosity to children is an even more challenging lesson than it might seem. A gift benefits its recipient, so we often go to great lengths to determine the most appropriate gifts for those most in need of them. But much of that effort would be incomprehensible to a young child. As a life lesson, giving, and the self-sacrifice that comes with it, is invaluable. Since gifts *will* be given on Christmas (even when, heaven knows, we don't need another toy in the house!), perhaps we can find teaching opportunity in the season of giving. Giving can lead to a lifetime of driven meaning, and it's clear that meaningful lives spring from early lessons. But how do we, as parents, apply those lessons?

The joy and obligation of selfless giving are difficult concepts for youngsters, and even teenagers, to understand because *everything* is given to them. There are no needs, and few wants, that they earn. This is appropriate while they develop the capabilities necessary for adulthood. But when it's time for our families to give, it's challenging to involve children in a way that offers the same sense of sacrifice and consequent gratification that we adults derive from it. This is the parenting challenge of translating real-world issues to a child's level. When there is a canned food drive at your daughter's elementary school, for example, you can take her to the supermarket for the specific purpose of buying the item to be donated. She can choose the item, hand money to the cashier, and place the item in the school's donation bin, all the while hearing of the importance of giving from you. In this manner, we need to walk our children through examples that we provide and make such virtuous behavior a norm in their lives. But don't be surprised when your little girl gets distracted a moment after her can enters the bin, not at all experiencing the sense of achievement that you have. It's hard to get children to feel that they have truly given of themselves.



But I think I have found a starting place. Each year at Tsunami Karate, we hold a gift drive to benefit A Woman's Place, the confidential shelter in Doylestown. Too often, women and their young children are forced to flee to shelters like this one with only the

clothes on their backs, and sometimes not even that. To a child displaced in such a horrific way, a toy can provide a world of comfort and needed distraction. My obligation to my students, however, is that I challenge them, as the title of this column suggests. If I create a program for giving that doesn't challenge those involved, I haven't done my job.

Each year, beginning a couple of weeks before Christmas, I sit members of my children's classes down for a talk. The chairs of my observation gallery are filled, too, with respectful, perky-eared parents. In each class the conversation goes exactly the same way:

"I'll bet you love toys, and I imagine you have lots of them," I say. "Raise your hand if you have...oh, let's say...*ten* toys in your house!"

Of course, every hand goes up enthusiastically.

"Wow! You have ten? You're so lucky! How many people have...*one hundred* toys!?"

After the even more enthusiastic, unanimous vote, I ask, "How many people have...*one thousand* toys!?" By now the children can barely sit still, feeling like such toy experts. The parents' gallery is aglow from blushing faces.

After learning which holidays are celebrated among the families present, I ask, "How many people think they might receive even *more* toys soon?"

All hands go up yet again. Then I say (and it varies, depending on which traditions are observed), "Suppose you woke up and, realizing that it's Christmas Day, launch out of bed and tear down the stairs only to find that there were no toys under the tree? What if there was no tree to put the toys under, or no house to put the tree in? This is what Christmas is really like for many poor and homeless children.

"Fortunately, you are karate kids, and that means you have to be heroes. Would you like to help these kids get a present?" The unrestrained hearts of children always respond well to this question, so I continue. "Every year, at Christmastime, everyone in our karate school is asked to help them, and here's how you can. After all of your presents are opened, and your living room is a mess of wrapping paper and new gifts, I want you to pick one to give away. It can be any one you want, but it has to be one that you haven't played with and is still in its box. Bring it to our karate school and put it in the big bin. We'll bring them all to these children."

Many of the children accept this assignment wholeheartedly, as do nearly all parents. But invariably, one or two children turn away from me, look at their parent with a horrified expression, and ask, "Do I have to give away my toy?"

I provide this answer: "Johnny, a minute ago you told me you have 1,000 toys at your house. Well, let's say you have a great Christmas this year and get ten new toys just for you. (I can't count the number of parents who, concerned with their child being inundated with material gifts at such a young age, have told me they'd be thrilled to

have him or her only receive ten presents!) A week after Christmas, after you've mixed all of your new toys in with the 1,000 you already have, do you think you'd even know if one wasn't there? But think of that child I told you about earlier, who comes down every year to find no presents. But *this* year, there is one there — the one you gave him! The toy you would have forgotten about would let this child have his best Christmas ever!" There are children under four years of age in some of our classes, but even they have enough empathy to understand this concept.

"If this sounds easy for you," I continue, "I have an additional challenge. I challenge you to give away your *favorite* present. You know what I mean — every year there's one toy that you love more than all of the others. It is the one you'd least like to part with. This challenge is hard. I've only ever done it once. I got a TV for Christmas, it was my favorite gift, and I gave it away. But I've gotten so much more joy out of telling this story than I would have by having yet another TV to watch in my house. You don't have to give away your favorite gift if you really don't want to. But I do want you to pick one present that was yours and bring it in, okay?"

Of course, it isn't always easy. There have even been a tear or two as a toy has been dropped in the bin by an insistent parent. But every year countless parents are grateful for having such a meaningful opportunity in their families. Your family can have this opportunity, just by you deciding to do so and setting the example by giving up one of your gifts first.

I tell this same story to all of my students, regardless of age. I make it more sophisticated in the adult version, but they, too, are invited to consider how plentiful their material possessions are, and how they will benefit from a commitment to give before even knowing what their sacrifice will involve.

There's one more step. At Christmas dinner, suggest to your parents that they ask their grandchildren, "How was your Christmas?" More often than not, rather than hearing of a favorite gift, they'll hear about the gift that was given.

That is how even someone who is very young can inspire all of us.

* * *

Your children need your presence more than your presents.

— Jesse Jackson

* * *

Bruce Costa is a father of three. During the last 25 years he has been a professional storyteller, international lecturer and author of hundreds of stories and published articles. He is chief instructor at Tsunami Karate and Hot Flow Yoga in Perkasio, PA, where he can be reached by calling 215-453-9983, or by visiting www.TsunamiKarate.net or www.HotFlowYoga.com. And please visit www.awomansplace.org. Be generous.