

Including children in holiday activities



Cooking together is one way for a family to spend time interacting.

Oh, the holidays. They can be joyous and warm – or stressful and budget-breaking – or all of the above. Plus they can leave families, particularly children, with unrealistic expectations.

To help individuals and families navigate the holidays without breaking the bank and still providing positive experiences, two Kansas State University specialists provided tips.

Start with a Plan

“If you’ve budgeted for holiday spending, stick to it,” said K-State Research and Extension family resource specialist Elizabeth Kiss. “If you don’t have a budget, make a plan. Decide how much you want to spend and what you want to spend it on.”

Gifts, cards, food and decorations are the things people typically spend money on around the holidays, she said. Think about holiday traditions at home, at work, with friends and at children’s schools.

Having a plan may mean having a conversation with family and friends about spending and expectations.

“Making a list is important,” Kiss said. “...It doesn’t have to take away any spontaneity....”

Kiss said food and decorations are nice, but spending time with those you care about is important too and can be done without spending a lot.

“... I go through catalogues, I go online, I like to walk through stores. When I do that, I’m getting ideas,” Kiss said. “I’m making lists. In my mind I’m on a shopping trip and not a buying trip. That way, when it’s time to buy, it takes less time.”

Credit versus cash

Using credit cards for holiday shopping has advantages, in that there’s no need to carry cash. There may also be warranty benefits, depending on the item, she said. The

is the best gift you can give them

drawbacks are that people sometimes lose track and overspend.

“Research has shown that when we buy things on credit, we tend to pay more,” Kiss said.

Using a debit card has some of the conveniences of using a credit card but carries with it the risk of overdrawing your bank account.

“Another (cash) method is the envelope method,” Kiss said. “Put the cash in an envelope. As you buy items, take the cash out and put receipts in. Once you’ve taken all of the cash out, you’re done.”

Giving gift cards can be a good option, she added, as long as recipients know they need to treat them as if they’re cash. Also, the purchaser should be aware of the terms of the gift card. Some come with fees and expiration dates.

A child’s view

Children are often showered with gifts during the holidays, but K-State child development specialist Bradford Wiles said some of that generosity is likely lost on the child.

“The reality of the research is that most children tend to have three to five favorite toys and beyond that, even if they play with other items, they’re not attached to those items,” he said.

“We’ve all heard the joke about (children) enjoying the box more than the gift,” he said, adding that young children can be

overwhelmed with an excess of gifts. Plus, if a young child is given an abundance of gifts routinely, parents are encouraging an expectation that could be difficult to alter later, he said. When children receive gifts from many people, they may start to believe they’re entitled to gifts, as opposed to being happy at the surprise.

Wiles encourages adults to help older children develop a wish list. That offers children guidance about what’s realistic and helps adult and child learn together about gift-giving expectations.

“If I could wave a magic wand, I would emphasize the quality of time over the quantity of objects...” he said.

Wiles agreed with Kiss about making a plan and communicating it, noting that he spoke from personal experience: “In July, I sent a note to my brothers that because we were essentially exchanging gift cards all the time, that we should instead focus on each other’s children. It was well received. Having those conversations with family members is really important.”

He said a good resource for people looking for age-appropriate gifts for children can be found on the National Association for the Education of Young Children website: (www.naeyc.org/ecp/resources/goodtoys).

“Have a plan and include children in carrying out the plan,” Kiss said. “If you’re

buying a fresh Christmas tree you can make it educational by talking about the different



Going for a walk, playing games or just coloring a picture together can be an opportunity for parents to spend time with their children.

options and costs. Or if you do holiday baking, that’s a time to teach about numbers and measuring and it’s an activity that you can do together. It may be really messy and I don’t know how beautiful the cookies will be, but it can be fun and the children will be really proud.”

The message this conveys to children, she said, is that holidays are not only about

spending money, but also about doing things together.

“Include your children in everything you can around the holidays,” Wiles said. “... They can be part of the wrapping or baking or visiting family and friends.... If you’re modeling the behavior that you’d like them to exhibit when they get older, that’s the best thing you can do.”

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