



Balance Is Key To Meaningful Holidays With Children, Says Director Of UNH's Child Study And Development Center

Contact: [Beth Potier](#)
603-862-1566
UNH Media Relations

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DURHAM, N.H. -- For families of preschool age children, the holiday gauntlet that now runs from Halloween through New Year's Day can bring great joy – and enormous stress, brought on by too many toys, too much candy, more parties and presents than young minds and bodies can manage gracefully.

When it comes to negotiating the holiday season's minefields – from celebrations to gift-giving to family dynamics – “it's a matter of balance,” says John Nimmo, executive director of the Child Study and Development Center at the University of New Hampshire. Nimmo, who is the Rand Stearns associate professor of family studies at UNH, shares tips for celebrating the holidays with preschool-age children.

To create meaningful celebrations

- Stay true to your family's values. Without considering values, holiday celebrations tend to be dictated by media and consumer forces: shopping, holiday blockbuster movies, and visits to Santa. Families can explore their own traditions – cultural, religious, ethnic – to engage their values in a way that's developmentally appropriate for their children. “And you can still go see Santa at the mall, if that's your thing,” Nimmo says. “It's a balance.”
- Engage children in developmentally appropriate ways. Activities like cooking a special meal, for example, can nurture cherished traditions while providing a range of ways children can get involved. Very young children, says Nimmo, can assist with mixing ingredients. As they progress developmentally, children can help measure ingredients, read the recipes, or even make decisions about how to prepare the meal.

To give meaningful, enduring toys

- “Pay attention to what your kids are excited about, challenged by, really into right now,” says Nimmo, adding that children under five years old are far less influenced by media or peers than older children. He recalls one holiday when he presented his own young daughter with a tape dispenser and tape: Hardly a traditional toy, but she was very interested in making collages at the time, and it became her favorite gift.
- Select toys that a child can use in a variety of ways. “Something they can only interact with one way limits creativity as well as how long they can use it,” says Nimmo.
- Avoid toys that require batteries, adult assistance, or are going to break easily.

- Consider the longevity of a toy. “Are you buying something that’s going to end up in the dump?” Nimmo says. It’s appropriate to share such environmental concerns with older preschoolers, whose environmental values begin to develop by age five or six.
- For children under five or six years old, says Nimmo, electronic media such as computer games – even learning games marketed to that age group – are not very useful. “When a child’s in front of a screen, think about what he might be doing otherwise: interacting, creating, being physical, engaging in dramatic play,” he says.

To keep the family peace

- If grandma wants to give a gift that parents disapprove of, be it a toy gun or a t-shirt with a logo on it, Nimmo advises a careful, balanced approach. “There can be a lot of conflict: it’s an argument about what you value for your children. It can get pretty tense,” he says. “You have to balance your values with the relationship you want for your family with your children.”

John Nimmo can be reached at 603-862-2834 or j.nimmo@unh.edu.