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give and receive – the psychology of gift-giving

Most of us haven't really given the art of giving and receiving presents a second thought, however a lot of research has gone into this social phenomenon. Social psychologists have studied gift-giving and generosity for decades. In many societies or cultures, the act of mutually exchanging goods, money or other services contributes to maintaining social cohesion and harmony.

by Andrew Greenfield

A gift or present may be given on such occasions as a birthday, Christmas, wedding, fathers' or mothers' day or wedding anniversary, however they are also often given as an expression of love or friendship, or gratitude, or just because someone is feeling generous. Giving a gift is a universal way to demonstrate interest or appreciation as well as strengthening bonds with others.

According to Devin A. Byrd, Associate Professor of the Department of Behavioural Sciences at South University, Savannah, Georgia, USA, "...there is the whole act – determining what needs to be given and making sure it fits with the person. There is an emotional lift when searching for the gift...". He concludes that it is better to give than to receive as this is a true act of altruism, unselfish concern for the wellbeing of others. When we give without expecting anything in return, we are improving our psychological health.

Dr Darlene Silvernail, also at South University, reports that "gift-giving feels good internally and there are extrinsic benefits as well...". She describes the enormous satisfaction when seeing the expression on the face of the gift receiver. "If you do something positive, positive psychology says you attract positive", Silvernail says. "People don't always give just to get something back, but many times we think 'if I do a good deed, something good will happen for me'."

Often as parents we are overwhelmed with the number of presents our children are given at birthday time, Christmas and other occasions. I am sure you have

wondered whether your children really value receiving gifts or just hastily discard the wrapping paper like hungry racoons scavenging for food and don't give a second thought to where the gift came from or why it was given. You might sometimes wonder whether your children are spoiled.

In my private practice, I see many children who appear to be very selfish and expect to be waited on hand and foot. It is important for parents to teach their kids the value of both receiving and giving presents. Even children can experience the pleasure of giving, and parents should encourage their children to share and reciprocate from an early age.

I always remember my parents encouraging me as a child to give eye contact and say thank you to the gift giver. When I received exactly the same present as my identical twin brother, I often had to hide my frustration with the lack of individual thought gone into the gift.

Parents should encourage their kids to appreciate what they have been given. They should encourage acts of generosity and learn to acknowledge their children's achievements in other ways besides giving tangible presents. This may include giving hugs, affirmation, encouragement and praise.

Often twins or multiples receive presents or gifts just because they are multiples. If parents think that their children don't really need more presents or are being spoiled, they should encourage them to take stock of what they have in terms of toys, games and tangible items and encourage them to think about helping



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children less fortunate than themselves, whether these children are at their school, in their community or in other countries.

At Christmas time, Kris Kringle or Secret Santa are good ways to reinforce the act of giving as well as receiving. Children could pass on a gift instead of spending money to buy something.

Research demonstrates that there are gender differences in gift-giving which emerge early in life. Researchers in Chicago studied 3- and 4-year-olds at a day care centre, all of whom had attended the same birthday party. The girls typically went shopping with their mothers and helped select and wrap the gift. Boys, meanwhile, were often unaware of what the gift was. "They would say, 'I had a sleep while my mum went shopping for it'", according to researcher M. A. McGrath.

The research on child and adolescent development tells us something very important about what happens in children's internal worlds. An occasion such as Christmas, for example, is a season that can shape a child's lifelong identity about giving. It is important for parents to help their children internalise the pleasure of giving.

Some ways for families and children to internalise the pleasure of giving include:

- Pledge to volunteer
- Sponsor an impoverished family

- Serve a meal to the homeless
- Donate to a food bank
- Visit other children in hospital and give them gifts.

The holiday season is the perfect time to talk to your children about your values and put them into action. As developmental psychologist Dr Marilyn Price-Mitchell reports, "...we are often so busy during the holidays, it's easy to go through the motions of gift-giving without connecting to the deeper meaning of giving. Yet it is these deep connections that shape children's identities, that teach them the gift of giving. Gift-giving can often teach children important lessons about compassion, empathy and meaning. By adolescence, young people have the capacity to think and act independently from their parents – to give conscious attention to and become passionate about giving. Whatever your gift-giving family traditions, it is important to revisit how your thinking has changed, and how you might want to adapt your traditions.

What children learn about giving during childhood and adolescence lasts a lifetime.

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