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GIFTS THAT LAST A LIFETIME

By Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.

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Gifts That Last a Lifetime

In this season of holiday gift buying, advertisers bombard us with messages, some of them contradictory. One ad tells us that the best way for men to show love is to spend three months' salary on a piece of diamond jewelry. On the other hand, MasterCard commercials remind us that there are some things ("Priceless" moments) that money can't buy.

"Oh, that's a sweet sentiment," you might say, "but can it really substitute for the latest videogame or hot toy?" Very few children raised in this materialistic culture would say, "Gee mom, thanks for making my favorite meal. What a great Christmas gift!"

Yet 20 years from now, these same children probably won't remember the items that they got for the current Christmas. They will, however, recall the special games that their family played together, the time that their older brother took them to a movie, or the way their parents tucked them in at night.

These are the little moments, which over time, have a huge impact. Unfortunately people tend to take them for granted. With so much emphasis on holiday shopping, and on buying the perfect gift, we can lose sight of the importance of the less flashy, but "priceless" gifts: gifts such as thoughtfulness and gratitude that we can give to one another all year round. A diamond may be forever, but its value is nothing compared to a lifetime of moments that money can't buy.

I'm not suggesting that you forego the presents this holiday season, but don't worry so much about how "perfect" they are. Go ahead and buy some gifts, but more importantly, resolve to focus your energy on helping others feel valued and appreciated. They will remember your acts of thoughtfulness and compassion long after the material gifts are gone.

Here are some examples of small gestures that can help people around you feel valued:

1. Show your appreciation with a thank-you, a smile or a hug (or all three.) It takes just a moment, but it can make a person's day.

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2. Practice a random act of kindness every day. Make this your "gift" to a stranger. For example, let someone in front of you in line. Hold a door open for someone. Smile and greet people you pass at work. These acts take only a few seconds or less, yet they create a mood that can last for hours.
3. Call up someone you haven't spoken to in a while, just to catch up on how they are. You've probably been meaning to do this for a long time. Now is a good time.
4. If you have children, give one child at a time your full attention for an afternoon: Go for a walk; go to the library; or just sit and read or draw together. The activity itself isn't as important as sharing time and interacting together. Going to a movie or watching a video doesn't count.
5. Write a note of appreciation to someone who is important to you. Don't be surprised if that person keeps the note for years to come.
6. Think of the way you'd like to be remembered by those around you, and give of yourself accordingly throughout the year. The added benefit for you is that you'll be in a more positive frame of mind overall.

Pauline Wallin, Ph.D. is a psychologist in Camp Hill, PA, and author of "Taming Your Inner Brat: A Guide for Transforming Self-defeating Behavior" (Beyond Words Publishing, 2001) Visit <http://www.innerbrat.com> for more information, and subscribe to her free, monthly Inner Brat Newsletter.

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