

**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES NEWSLETTER**

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## Toy Tips for the Holidays

Diana Converse, Family Life Educator

Choosing a toy that a child will enjoy can be a challenging task. There are so many toy choices. It is easy to select something we think looks fun rather than selecting something because it matches the child's age and abilities. It's also easy to get caught up in buying what is popular rather than what is appropriate. Here are a few suggestions for the types of toys that children might be interested in:

### Toddlers (1-3 years old)

- Encourage them to use their motor skills
- Allow them to be independent when they play
- Help encourage new language skills
- Can be dumped, filled, taken apart or put together
- Are pretend versions of real objects
- Can be easily carried around with them
- Have activities that can be repeated

### Preschoolers (3-5 years)

- Allow them to pretend they are someone else
- Encourage them to be creative
- Have simple rules and are easy to play
- Allow them to experiment and try things out
- Encourage building and problem solving
- Encourage and support early writing and literacy

### Early School (5-9 years)

- Encourage and support outdoor play and games
- Have increasingly difficult rules and parts

- Allow for more complex pretend play
- Encourage cooperation

By using these guidelines you can make choices for toys that are both safe and appropriate for young children. There are a few points to remember when you are shopping:

- Read the box to see the recommended age for that toy. It is best to purchase one that is in the middle of the child's age range so it won't be too easy or too difficult.
- Don't choose things that are way above an age range in hopes of challenging the child. It will just be frustrating or boring and the toy may not be safe for a younger child.
- Resist picking things just because you like them. Think carefully about the individual child and what he or she would like.
- Watch for safety hazards. Toys with small parts, long cords or string should be avoided. Look carefully at the toy to see if there is anything that could cause harm to the child.
- Try to choose something that can be used in several ways rather than only one way. This makes the toy more interesting and will allow the child to use it longer.
- Pay attention to the noise level of the toy. Things that are loud will not only get on your nerves after a while but they may be scary to the child as well.

The most important characteristic of any toy is that it is one that will be FUN!

# Helping Siblings Get Along

Diana Converse, Family Life Educator

Do your kids quarrel, fight or tease each other? Are you at your wits end wondering what to do about it? Sometimes children are simply bored, tired and/or hungry. Other times they are seeking attention or trying to develop their own sense of power. Understanding why siblings quarrel can help you know what to do. The first step is to stop and ask yourself why sibling rivalry is so prevalent in your household. Then ask yourself how YOU are contributing to this unwanted behavior.

## Fighting for Attention

Sometimes siblings will squabble to get more attention from you (and they hope it will take your attention away from their brother or sister.) What you can do:

Ignore mild quarrels. Ignoring sometimes works, but only if no one is in danger of getting hurt. Remain calm, avoid speaking or looking at your child. If things don't seem to be out of control you may find it helpful to leave the room. Don't "reward" them by getting involved, even if it's to tell them to "get along or be nice to each other." Ignoring the behavior works best when parents make the effort to give attention to their children for good behavior.

Spend time with each child individually. Studies show that 15 to 20 minutes of one-to-one attention with a child each day will significantly reduce whining and aggressive behavior. Reading to your child, playing a game, or simply involving the child in everyday routine activities are good ways to give positive attention. Have children take turns helping you get dinner ready each night so that you can enjoy them as individuals.

Teach children to ask for attention in a positive way. Use statements like, "When you need a hug, let me know"; "Yelling hurts my ears, try asking for help in a nicer way."

Help each child feel uniquely special. It's not necessary or even possible to treat children equally in every way. Each of your children has a distinctive personality and their own special interests. Encourage these differences in each of them. Avoid making comparisons, and try not to set your children up for competition. Saying "Angie loves to draw and paint" is better than saying "Angie is a better artist than Jason."

## Fighting for Power

Part of growing up is learning about personal power. Children naturally experiment to see whether they can get each other to do things. Competition between siblings can sometimes make children feel insecure and intolerant. Learning to handle competitive feelings is a real challenge for young children. What you can do:

Avoid taking sides. For younger children, calmly but firmly separate the two and lead them to separate rooms. Avoid yelling or lecturing. Talk with them only after they have cooled down. For older children, have the kids sit on the floor near each other and tell them that they can get up only when they each can tell you what they did wrong. Each child has to take responsibility for their own actions instead of blaming the other.

Give children choices. As children learn to make simple choices between wearing red or yellow shorts and playing with a train or truck, they begin learning how to make decisions. Sometimes they also learn the consequences of those simple decisions. Making good decisions takes practice. An example of a choice you can give goes like this; "You two can decide how to share the play dough, or I will put it away for the rest of the day."

Encourage win-win negotiations. Lead children through problem-solving steps: (1) stop the action, (2) listen to each other, (3) think of different ways to solve the problem, (4) choose an idea everyone agrees on. Help children evaluate why their plan did or did not work. A child who has lots of practice in thinking of different ways to solve a problem is much more likely to solve a conflict in a positive way.

*Excerpted from Getting Along: Sibling Fights, University of Iowa Extension by L. Oesterleic.*



# Grandparenting from a Distance

By Joe Pergola, Regional Family Life Extension Faculty

Being separated from a grandchild by a significant geographical distance can make being an involved grandparent difficult. As a result of moves by both grandparents and parents, and later by the grandchildren themselves, long distances increasingly separate grandparents and their grandchildren. Two problems that emerge are the scarcity of one-on-one time and the inability to be part of the grandchild's daily life.

No matter how far a grandparent and grandchild live from one another, three things can help to develop and maintain a strong relationship.

First, the time the grandparent spends alone with a grandchild becomes very special and is often remembered for a long period of time. Second, most parents want and will encourage a close bond between their own parents and child. Third, technological advances make it easier than ever to stay in contact with grandchildren.

According to the Foundation for Grandparents and the AARP, several strategies can help to develop and maintain good relationships with grandchildren from a distance:

- Set up a family meeting with children and grandchildren in person or by telephone to identify the potential problems of being geographically apart.
- Develop a tentative schedule for phone calls and e-mails to ensure regular contact.
- Devise a plan to be together in person as much as feasible.
- Dedicate some financial resources to support the plan. For example, parents might pay for the grandparents airfare to visit the grandchild. The grandparent might save money to have a grandchild come for a week or two during summer vacation.
- Allow for as much personal grandparent-grandchild time as possible.



Keeping regular contact and selecting age-appropriate communication techniques is perhaps the key to a strong grandparent-grandchild relationship. Some ideas are:

- Call regularly (ideally at a scheduled time) as it is important for both grandparent and grandchild to hear a live voice. Provide a calling card for grandchildren to call.

- Share pictures through the mail or use e-mail to send digital pictures. Give a grandchild an inexpensive digital camera for their birthday. If you are not technologically comfortable, take a community class. Using technology will most likely impress a grandchild.
- Send a picture with a frame that holds a taped message (these frames have recently become available).
- Exchange videotapes or CD-ROMs of each other, especially of the grandchild doing fun activities such as sports or school plays. Tell a story or share some family history using a videotape. Send a packaged set of videotapes or CD-ROMs to the grandchild to encourage their use.
- Audiotape or write your stories to share.
- Write and send cards, letters and notes either through normal mail or e-mail. Even with e-mail, it is still nice to use old technology and periodically send a special card with a note.
- Keep up with a grandchild's changing interests. This shows support and understanding.
- Send small, inexpensive gifts of favorite things, like home-made cookies.
- Try to be present for important events such as a significant family holiday or graduation. Discuss with the parents the best times to schedule such a visit. Tape these events and give a copy to the grandchild.



It is possible to have a close attachment with a grandchild who lives far away, although it does take some effort, creativity and active involvement from the parents. Both grandparents and grandchildren will benefit from the effort.

Additional web sites with useful suggestions are GrandLoving.com, GrandparentWorld.com, GrandTimes.com, and the Grandparents Resource Center.

*Source: Kenneth Tremblay, Our Town Brandon  
August 2005, page 31*

## Don't Let The Holiday Cheer Overwhelm Your Diet

Mary A. Keith, PhD, LD, Foods, Nutrition and Health Agent

The holiday season is for enjoying with family and friends, and a major part of our culture's celebrations involve food. You don't want the food and drink to ruin your diet, but don't let your diet ruin your celebrations either! Carrot sticks and apple



slices won't make anyone happy. Start now to defuse the bombs in

your household.

### Ask Family What They REALLY Want

Not just for gifts, but for food. If it's a really hot-button issue in the family, you might want to request secret notes. Ask each person who will be joining your table for the big meals which dishes they really, really want, and which they really don't care about.

You might be surprised that no one will care if you skip the marsh-mallow sweet potato casserole. Great! That's one less thing to make, and a lot fewer calories to have sitting around the kitchen. Or at least you can only make one small dish of it, instead of a huge pan full.

And if no one cares one way or the other about the green beans, then you can probably adjust it to reduce the calories without anyone noticing.

### Adjust the Calories in What You Make

So, if no one mentions the green bean casserole, how can you slice the calories? Use a fat free canned soup. Use crumbled low fat crackers seasoned with herbs for the topping instead of fried onions. Or better yet, dress up the green beans with almonds,



slivered pimentos, olive oil and lemon juice and skip the creamy sauce completely.

Give the turkey enough time that you can let the pan juices separate before you make the gravy. Skim off the fat, and thicken it with cornstarch instead of flour.

For dressing use half a box of stuffing mix. Sauté apples and onions, make some brown rice, mix it all together, moisten with chicken broth and bake. No one will notice the lack of calories with all the extra flavor.

### Serve with Flair, on Smaller Plates

It's true; we eat as much with our eyes as we do with our tongues. And research has shown that if we use smaller plates we tend to eat less. So if you're thinking of getting a set of special holiday plates, get 8 inch plates instead of 10. Get smaller serving bowls and spoons too. Think how much extra space there will be on the table for a special centerpiece or individual place markers instead! If you won't get new plates, dig out the smallest ones you have.

### Eat Often, Eat Healthy

Another tidbit of research news has been that if we eat something every three hours we are less likely to overeat later. So, keep a bowl of fruit out in plain sight. Decorate it with a ribbon to call attention to it. Keep a dish of veggies with low fat dip in the front of the fridge, some baked crackers or pretzels on the counter. And do eat breakfast! You'll eat less during the day. Happy Holidays!



## **Take Control of Your Holiday Spending**

by Lisa Leslie, Hillsborough County Extension Agent

The holiday season has become synonymous with shopping and spending. Consumers of all ages will be bombarded with advertisements designed to steer us toward buying gifts, toys, holiday decorations, new home furnishings, holiday vacations, and much more. The commercial messages often imply that new material things – such as electronic products, toys, appliances, clothes- are crucial to enhancing the quality of our life. These advertisements will come in the form of traditional commercials that are easy to spot. They will also come in less overt product advertising such as product placement in a movie or television show, news stories, or celebrity endorsements. An underlying theme is that products can help us improve our social standing and make our holiday extra special.

Ok, so the pressure is on!

Even though it's the holiday season and a time of good cheer, we still need to spend realistically. Your job as a financially responsible consumer is to make a holiday budget that fits your personal situation. Consider your income and your financial goals. Do not sacrifice your financial plans for fleeting holiday cheer.

### **Tips for Controlling Holiday Spending:**

**Size up your financial situation.** The first step is to sit down and look at your financial picture. Decide just how much you can afford to spend this holiday season.

**Make conscious spending decisions.** Determine why you are spending. Does your holiday spending match your long term financial plans? Are you spending to fulfill societal obligations and ignoring your own personal values?

### **Plan to keep your financial freedom!**

A good way to stay financially free is to avoid taking on new debt for the holidays. If you are already carrying credit card balances, adding to those balances can be very expensive.

### **Make a holiday budget.**

Make a holiday budget, set reasonable limits and stick to those limits. First, make a comprehensive list of all the holiday extras and their estimated cost. This will include decorations, new clothes, food, gifts, travel, charitable contributions, and any other holiday items. Set realistic spending amounts for each category.

### **Consider less expensive, meaningful gift giving options.**

Consider giving homemade gifts or a gift of your time and energy. A special home-made dinner, a child's one-of-a-kind art piece or an IOU certificate for a house cleaning, can mean much more than the latest gadget.



**Avoid impulse buys.** Do not shop when you are tired or rushed. Shop around and compare your options.

I wish you a holiday filled with peace and happiness and a new year that is free from debt!

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