



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl

Is it Monday Yet? 11/30/23



When my wife and I were young-er parents, occasions throughout the year that involved gift giving were both cherished times and times we anticipated with great anxiety. While I think we came naturally to the lessons we could teach our children about the giving of gifts, we fell short on how to talk with them about receiving gifts, especially those that might not have met their expectations. Like it or not, the act of gift giving is a practice deeply rooted in many of the traditions we practice, and one that would be tough to altogether avoid, though we tried.

When we talked about it many years later... Tuesday night, in fact, Eileen and I decided this was because, as children, WE were never trained in the art of how to receive gifts (yes, we were blaming our parents!): the emphasis always seemed to be on GIVING, and we both remembered being told many times that it was better to give gifts than to receive gifts. Because of this, receiving received short shrift, with the vast majority of our gift related time focussed on making and presenting a gift another person would enjoy. In fact, neither of us ever purchased a gift for someone else until we were out in the world on our own, and sometimes not even then: we both laughed as Eileen remind me that the first gift she gave me was a keychain fashioned from a shell she found on top of Mount McKinley, of all places! And as a family, made gifts have always more highly prized than purchased gifts.

I'll never forget the time a neighbor gave my 8 year old a toilet paper holder she had crocheted. As I saw her walking towards him, holding it like the most precious item on Earth, thoughtfully decorated with ribbons and bows, straight from her heart, the scene suddenly went into slow motion and my only desperate, ridiculous inclination was to call a timeout and give my son a quick sideline chat about how to respond. I hope YOU have never been there, but if you have been (heck, even if you haven't) I don't need to tell you how mortified Eileen and I were by his response, and there's really no recovering from that in the moment, or maybe ever.

Helping our children develop the skills to be gracious gift receivers, especially in these sorts of scenarios, was a parenting failure both Eileen and I will readily acknowledge. We thought we

had taught them to be kind, to be generous, to be friendly, and to be polite, and we thought that was enough.

In the context of the great value our family placed on honesty, however, we may have confused them by also encouraging them *to hide their disappointment* rather than understand and neutralize, at its origin, the root cause of disappointment in these cases, thereby helping them to recognize and head off their own flawed pre-gift thinking, and to appreciate that no matter what the gift, there is always room for gratitude. In the case of our neighbor's gift, for example, we failed to encourage our son to look past the item itself, into the heart of the person presenting it, and to be grateful for our neighbor's time and effort.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized how important it is to teach children to receive gifts as an aspect of their social development, and a real proving ground for character development. Done in the best possible way, receiving gifts graciously instills in our children a sense of appreciation, humility, and respect for others and, if done effectively, is itself a way to give a gift to the gift giver. This lesson goes beyond simply having good manners, and is more about cultivating an *attitude of gratitude*, so to speak, and an empathetic heart *for all encounters with others*, wherein even someone else's time, outside of traditional gift giving moments, is valued as a type of gift. Here are some tips that might help you (I know they would've helped us!)..

Understanding Gratitude

- Model Gratitude: Children learn by example. Demonstrate gratitude in your daily life. Express thanks for small things, whether it's a kind gesture, a meal, or a compliment (both concrete and abstract gifts). Your actions will serve as a powerful model for your children.
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- Discuss the Value of Thoughtfulness: Explain to children that a gift is a symbol of thought and care. That the act of giving a gift is not just about the item received but the intention behind it. Help them understand that someone thought about them and took the time to select or make a gift. And in the case of abstract gifts such as a compliment or recognition, that the person took the time to notice X and to share their thoughts about it (which is not always easy for others to do).

Before Receiving Gifts

- Set Expectations: Before an occasion like a birthday party, talk to your child about the importance of appreciating every gift they receive, regardless of what it is or whether they already have it (one we were blindsided by many times). By addressing their pre-gift thinking, you will help them focus on the thought behind the gift and maybe head off at the pass those flawed runaway thoughts that end up setting them up for disappointment.
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- Role Play: Practice scenarios with your child where they receive different types of gifts, material and abstract. Teach them to say thank you and show appreciation, even if the gift isn't something they wanted or liked (I am sure I can find the crocheted toilet paper holder, if you think it'd help).
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- Discuss Feelings: Talk about how it feels to give and receive gifts. Ask your child how THEY felt when they gave a gift to someone and when they received one. This helps them understand the emotions involved in the process.

Consider a No Gift Event: Or an event where donations are given to a cause greater than self in lieu of gifts. By taking the emphasis off the transferring of a material

possession from one person to another, the power of gifts to disappoint is neutralized, as the power of gratitude is amplified.

During the Gift Receiving

- Encourage Immediate Gratitude: Teach your child to always say "thank you" upon receiving a gift. It's important they acknowledge the giver's effort immediately.
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- Appropriate Reactions: Teach your child to maintain a positive demeanor when receiving gifts. If they are disappointed, help them to use this disappointment as a tripwire for deeper thinking about the gift giver's intentions. Rather than encouraging them to HIDE their disappointment, encourage them to understand what they are feeling and teach them how to use their internal disappointment to trigger a positive response of gratitude, giving the gift giver their gift of appreciation in return.
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- Show Interest: Encourage your child to show interest in the gift, ask questions, or say something positive about it. This demonstrates respect for the giver's effort and, in a way, takes the focus off the material item itself. .

After Receiving Gifts

- Writing Thank You Notes: Encourage your child to write thank-you notes, old school style. This practice not only shows gratitude, but provides your child with a chance to reflect on the experience, and also helps them to develop their writing and expressive skills.
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- Discussing the Gifts Later: Have conversations about the gifts received and what they mean. This can be an opportunity to discuss the value of thoughtfulness and the joy of giving and receiving.
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- Practicing Reciprocity: Teach your child the joy of giving back. It doesn't have to be material; it could be a gesture, a drawing, a card, or an act of kindness.

Teaching children to receive gifts with gratitude is an ongoing process that requires patience and consistent reinforcement. It's about nurturing a sense of appreciation that extends beyond material possessions. By instilling these values, children learn to respect the feelings of others, appreciate the effort behind each gift, and develop a lifelong attitude of gratitude. Gift giving is not going away, which of course means that gift receiving is also here to stay. Honing skills of gift receiving is an important part of shaping your child's interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, and a great opportunity, among many, to build a foundation for healthy, respectful relationships throughout life.