

Curbing the Gimmes: Creating Givers in a Consumer-Driven Culture

If you've ever witnessed a child with a full-blown case of the "gimmes," you know it's not pretty. This disease, so prevalent in our culture, tends to reach epidemic levels during the holiday season, but it can occur anytime. Symptoms include whining, grumbling, or outright tantrums. If left untreated, the gimmes can cause unresolved feelings of discontentment, along with serious financial stress.

In short, allowing children to develop a sense of entitlement isn't good for them -- or us. Both adults and children are bombarded daily, though, with messages that we need more, more, more. These messages can come from television advertisements, magazines, peers, and even our own family. Knowing how to counter them can seem daunting, but we believe it can be done. Below, you'll find tips for preventing the gimmes, as you teach your children how to live a life of gratitude and giving.

- **Set the example.** Children learn more from our actions than our words, so it's important to think about what values we unconsciously teach. If every weekend is spent at the mall, children quickly learn that "stuff" matters. Talk as a family about what your values really are. Try to articulate those values in one or two brief sentences, such as, "As a family, we value continual learning, building family relationships, and improving our community and world." Now think about how much time and money you spend on fostering those values. If the answer is "very little," you may need to adjust your priorities and schedule. The more your habits align with your values, the greater the takeaway for your children.
- **De-emphasize stuff.** A 2006 study from the Lego™ Learning Institute found that half of parents in France and Japan characterized shopping as a play activity. Our children are forgetting how to play and how to entertain themselves. Change this trend in your home by offering plenty of non-commercial, at-home activities. Play board games, go for a walk, build with blocks, have a tea party, bake cookies together, or teach your child a handicraft. These types of activities build competence and creativity. They also create a slower, more peaceful pace for children.
- **Create a climate of giving.** Giving isn't something we do just during the holidays or during a food drive or other charity event. Giving is a way of life and it starts at home. Encourage your children to look for ways to help, such as making a sibling's bed or helping with homework. On busy mornings, an older child can brush a younger child's hair or grab a bowl of cereal. Consciously share the value that "we are a family and families help each other." Get to know your neighbors and be aware of their needs. Take a meal to neighbors after a surgery, illness, or the arrival of a new baby. Rake leaves or shovel snow from an elderly neighbor's driveway.
- **Manage technology wisely.** Marketers spend more than \$17 billion annually on advertisements targeted at children, according to Juliet Schor, author of *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (2005). Many of these advertisements come directly into your home via television and the Internet, and they have a profound effect on your child's susceptibility to consumer culture. It's important to have conversations early about how

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marketing works. Children need to understand that marketers intentionally make products seem appealing and desirable, whether we need them or not. Help children learn to critically analyze a marketer's message and a product's value. At the same time, limit your children's exposure to media messages. Limit television viewing and/or opt for digital services that don't include commercials.

- **Offer role models.** The media sometimes seems to encourage a culture of narcissistic, frenzied living. Children need to understand that, in fact, most people do not choose to live this way, now or in the past. Share stories about friends, family members, and influential people that exemplify a lifestyle of gratitude and giving back. Read children's books that broaden perspective while teaching character. For example, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura Ingalls Wilder depicts a Christmas in which the children receive nothing but a pair of mittens and a piece of candy, yet are wholly grateful. Younger children will enjoy *Boxes for Katje*, by Candace Fleming (2003). Based on a true story, a young American girl sends boxes of soap, chocolate, and socks to a family in Holland after World War II.

Children are often naturally somewhat egocentric. Helping them learn to think about others and avoid the traps of consumerism is an ongoing process that takes many years. Be patient, set the example, and be intentional as you plan activities and spend money; you'll inoculate your children from the dreaded disease of the "gimmies."

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