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Purdue expert: Nice holiday gifts for kids don't require big spending

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. - A Purdue University child development specialist says parents can give their children nice holiday gifts without spending a lot of money.

Judith Myers-Walls, an associate professor, Extension specialist and certified family life educator, suggests four ways to give inexpensive gifts: purchase less expensive toys, shop for used items, make your own toys and give certificates to do something.

When shopping for inexpensive or used toys, Myers-Walls says you still have to watch out for safety and quality.

"It's not a bargain if it breaks right away," she says. "Look for the classic toys - blocks, sturdy dolls or sturdy stuffed animals. The best toys don't do a lot by themselves. They stimulate a child's creativity and imagination."

Myers-Walls says to make sure the toy was originally safe and still is. Such items, which can often be found in stores that sell used toys or used children's clothing, should not have chipped paint or broken edges.

Homemade toys have several benefits, Myers-Walls says.

"The great thing about homemade toys is they are inexpensive and flexible. Sometimes you can make them with the child, and you can often remake them into another type of toy," she says.

An example of a homemade gift is a puzzle that can be made by taking a piece of paperboard, like the back of a cereal box, and cutting it into several pieces.

Another idea is to create a play prop box.

"You take a box and fill it with items that are all related to a kind of role playing," Myers-Walls says. "You could have a hair salon prop box with hair rollers, combs, brushes and a hair dryer that doesn't work. Or you could make a store prop box with empty food containers, play money, bags and baskets. Often they're things you could find around the house anyway, but gathering them in one place stimulates play."

Some Web sites that offer ideas on homemade toys and how to make them include: Robyn's Nest (<http://www.robynsnest.com/homemade.htm>), Artists Helping Children (<http://www.artistshelpingchildren.org>) and Suite101 (http://kids-outdoor-activities.suite101.com/article.cfm/natures_toys)

Certificates for activities can be anything from a ticket to do the child's chores around the house for a day, a date with mom or dad, tickets to play games, or a music night.

"Parents need to set limits," Myers-Walls says. "Kids can't turn in a ticket at bedtime or use the ticket to stay up all night, or they have to give a day's notice to make sure parents don't have anything else they need to do instead.

"You can still have a special time at the holidays during hard economic times. You can talk with kids about financial problems, but don't overwhelm them with the concern. Holidays are all about hope, and it can be a time for the whole family to look toward a better future."

Writer: Greg McClure, (765) 494-9394, gmcclure@purdue.edu

Source: Judith Myers-Walls, (765) 494-2959, jmyerswa@purdue.edu

Purdue News Service: (765) 494-2096; purduenews@purdue.edu

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