

A Simple Gift

By Rosario Villasana-Ruiz

As the temperature drops, the wind whips around us and the days grow shorter we feel the approach of the winter holidays. Many people celebrate in one manner or another depending on their traditions or new choices. This is an excellent time to think of a major holiday which draws much attention as stores prepare earlier and earlier to entice us to ever greater spending.

You guessed!! *Only ___ more shopping days till Christmas!* How many times will we hear this in the next few weeks?

As a parent I remember being surprised when my children found much more of interest in the packaging and the boxes their toys came in than in the toys themselves. I have to admit, I was also disappointed as I thought of the money I'd spent, and bills yet to come in the mail, I guess I thought I'd get a bigger bang for my dollar! Of course, it makes perfect sense that young children are more interested in the boxes... what endless possibilities...what an opportunity to creatively explore spaces, filling, dumping, sitting on, chewing, hiding in, etc. The toys inevitably entertained them for very short periods of time and were soon collecting dust on the shelf. Sort of like that bicycle or exercise machine.

In my capacity working with parents and training Early Childhood Education students, I hear many such stories and am often asked the question, "What should I get my child for Christmas" Parents want to know what is developmentally appropriate, how they can help their children get ahead and provide ways for children to enjoy themselves. Parents are willing to use often limited funds to buy something they think will be of help to their children and that will keep them busy.

I often caution them about the over commercialization of the Christmas holidays. One doesn't need to stretch themselves so far that stress is the end result. Children most need calm, loving parents who can provide attention and care. Have you ever gotten so far in debt that you snap at your children? The six weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's are often the most stressful of the year. Perhaps there is a message here. Granted it isn't easy to resist all the tempting advertising and momentum to splurge on gifts...or the guilt one might feel when not out buying and getting things. Perhaps it is time to begin new traditions, or return to cherished traditions to celebrate the season.

How often have you seen parents with their children at major shopping malls or stores way past a healthy bedtime? How happy do the children look? I have often seen near abuse at the mall as the child has a tantrum, gets too tired, hungry or bored. Do yourself and your child a favor, spare them the long hours of shopping. Shopping malls are NOT child friendly. Children can not tolerate extended periods confined to one space, having to "behave", be quiet, or stop running. The overstimulation of visual distractions, noise and bright lights is guaranteed to cause a melt down. This is a set-up for frustration and conflict for both parent and child.

"The manufactured, perfectly shaped, realistically finished toy incorporates in its very perfection a limitation to the child's fantasy and imagination. The perfectly shaped, realistically finished airplane will never be anything else to him but an airplane. He must submit to that. It limits his freedom in the projection of himself...Children

become very quickly bored with mechanical toys" writes Sheila Neilsen in an article in the Peridot Journal.

This addresses the notion that often what children need is NOT what we are being sold. When one observes children we see their sheer delight in the simple things...running, jumping, playing ball with a loving adult, working in the garden, in other words, connection with loved ones brings joy to the child. This is also often the hardest gift to give...our time and absolute attention.

Remember also, cherished toys that are loved for years are often the ones MADE for a child. Children will often play, sleep and even travel with a homemade toy because it is specially and lovingly made for them.

As Bruno Bettlheim writes in his book *A Good Enough Parent* "From a child's play, we can gain understanding of how he sees and construes the world—what he would like it to be, what his concerns are, what problems are besetting him. Through his play, he expresses what he would be hard pressed to put into words. No child plays spontaneously just to while away the time, although he and the adults observing him may think so. Even when he engages in play partly to fill empty moments, what he chooses to play is motivated by inner processes, desires, problems anxieties. What is going on in the child's mind determines his play activities: play is his secret language, which we must respect even if we do not understand it." Now, what kind of toy can honor this most serious and important aspect of play? Please keep this in mind as you do your Christmas gift preparation or shopping. It is equally important to take care of you; a parent and caregiver who can really enjoy the season is a gift to the family. Perhaps this is why the "old fashioned" ideas are gaining such popularity again, home cooking, playing games, visiting friends and family, and making arts and crafts. I know that I'll be able to take time off from work and I'm looking forward to catching up with friends I don't get to see very much, work in the garden and around the house, read and enjoy being with my family without the pressure of checking our various schedules. This is the greatest gift of all.