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Peer presents pressure

By **Stephanie Dunnewind**
Seattle Times staff reporter

The giving season can seem a little too giving when kids move into junior high and their social circle — all requiring BFF gifts — expands.

Girls, especially, can find budgets stretched as they pick out presents not only for family but anywhere from a handful to dozens of friends. Imbued with meaning, peer gifts can cement friendships, but also raise etiquette issues.

"The gift buying has ramped up in middle school for us," wrote Bellevue mom Cindy Hastings in an e-mail to The Times. When her daughter Courtney was in elementary school, they bought \$5 gifts for a few friends, plus a gift for her teacher and Girl Scout leader. "It all changed in middle school because the friends increase two or three fold ... and you can't find a 'cool' gift for \$5."

Many girls find creative ways to honor each friend, often opting for homemade gifts. Others turn to re-gifting or gift exchanges.

In sixth grade, Hastings agreed to pay \$10 a gift for five friends, with Courtney picking up anything she spent above that limit. Now an eighth-grader, Courtney has to use her own money. This year, her mom suggested hosting a gift exchange holiday party instead, with a \$25 cap.

"Each girl will leave with one quality gift rather than several cheaper gifts," Hastings said. "It will keep her holiday shopping down significantly and they will have a party together."

The dozen high-schoolers in Alison King's Auburn Girl Scout troop organize an annual Secret Santa exchange with a \$5 limit — "a challenge in our world today," she admits. But the girls are still inventive. "Some make the

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Courtney and Devon King make gifts for friends and for pets: dog and cat toys, cloth yoyos, a scarf, a pillow and gloves.

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gift, others hit the dollar store and others just shop well."

In addition to their troop exchange, King's daughters Courtney, 18, and Devon, 15, are making bath salts and fleece pillow and blanket sets for six or seven friends each.

"Put some thought into your gifts; it doesn't have to be expensive to be valuable to your best buds," advised Lauren Michael, a Cadette Girl Scout and Bothell eighth-grader. "One year I made all of my friends bookmarks with their names in Greek. If you want to give everyone something unique but don't have a wide budget, make something."

But the cheery exchange can also turn teary if some friends feel slighted or left out.

Duvall junior Katie Hill tries to limit her spending to \$10 a person and picks out similar gifts for 10 close friends. "I worry about one friend talking to another, like, 'What did you get from Katie?' and then people's feelings getting hurt when someone got a nicer gift. Sometimes it is hard to stick with the budget I set myself, but I do pay for these gifts myself."

Another option is handing out candy, holiday pencils or homemade cookies. That way, no one feels obligated to return the favor and "it's a nice way to spread holiday cheer without breaking the bank," Hill said. "And everyone loves this kind of friendly gesture."

Some of Devon's friends don't always reciprocate, King said. "There are hurt feelings, but I try and stress with Devon that it is always better to give than receive and she is very thoughtful for giving the gift."

That's the right message, agrees **Corinne Gregory**, president of Bellevue-based PoliteChild. "The joy in giving gifts should be seeing the expressions on people's faces when they open them," she said. "You don't always have to get something in return."

Michael, the Bothell eighth-grader, has spent some time considering how to avoid gift faux pas. "If you want to give gifts to some of your friends, but not all of them, don't give gifts out at school," she suggests. "Mail it to them or take it to their houses personally."

Also, she says, "make sure that all of your gifts are around the same price, and take off the price tags. Otherwise your friends that get cheap gifts, or something that clearly wasn't intended to be thoughtful but just a 'here-you-

Gift tips

Local Girl Scout leaders and members share ideas for cutting costs this season.

Gift swap: Many youth groups stage gift swaps. Ellen Brenden's Bellevue Girl Scout troop, for example, organizes a "secret snowman" with three to four small gifts (homemade encouraged, \$5 limit total) and a white elephant exchange "where everyone brought something used that they no longer wanted but thought someone else would either enjoy or get a laugh from," she explained.

Re-gifting: Seventh- and eighth-grade students in a Bainbridge Island Girl Scout troop agreed re-gifting is OK. "Many had been given gifts that were great, but not of interest to them," noted troop leader Ruth Lentz. Auburn mom Alison King once made her daughter, now 15, return an expensive coat she received as a gift from a friend, until the friend assured her it was an unwanted birthday present re-gifted.

Homemade ideas: Cookies, compilation CD, decorated picture frames, beaded jewelry, key chains, ornament, knitted scarf or hat.

Gift ideas Candy, coffee mugs, notebooks, bubble bath, small teddy bears, Dollar Store items, stationary set, stamp, candle, lotion, earrings. Gift cards for iTunes, movie theater or coffee shop.

Stephanie Dunnewind,

Seattle Times staff reporter

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go-so-you-don't-feel-left-out-but-whatever' gift, they will feel even more left out because they will assume that you don't like them as much as your other friends."

Gregory recommends surprised gift recipients follow up with a thank-you note emphasizing how touched they felt by the unexpected present. Homemade goodies are always a good back-up gift that shows time and thought, she said.

Several moms of boys report gift exchanges are nearly always initiated by girls. When giving gifts to the opposite sex, **Gregory** suggests teens err on the side of good taste and stick with small presents.

Hill only buys gifts for one or two good guy friends. "I have exchanged with boys, but that can be a little awkward, because in high school, they are kind of oblivious to any etiquette concerning gifts, and a gift from a girl can come as an uncomfortable surprise," she explained.

For all students, **Gregory** advocates limiting recipient lists to close friends so gifts are meaningful. "There's pressure on kids to give gifts to their entire social circle," she said. "The question of why they're giving gifts has changed from 'Because I want to' to 'Because it's expected and I have to.' It takes the whole heart out of it."

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