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## How to help kids handle disappointment

By [Stephanie Dunnwind](#)  
*Seattle Times staff reporter*

From the too-expensive iPod to the no-way violent video game to the "our apartment doesn't allow pets," some parents are dealing with kids who did not get exactly what they asked for this holiday season.

And that's OK, experts say. Excluding abusive, neglectful or severely impoverished situations, kids can stand — and indeed, benefit from — a mild dose of being bummed.

"We want kids to feel loved and happy, but some things they ask for are not healthy or affordable," said Betsy Taylor, author of "What Kids Really Want That Money Can't Buy: Tips for Parenting in a Commercial World." "Saying 'no' is an appropriate parental position. Don't feel bad about it. In the long run, kids will be served by it even though there's momentary disappointment."

When parents spend over their budget or cave on gifts they feel are inappropriate, it shows kids parents will compromise family values to avoid upsetting them, said parent educator Bonnie Harris, author of "When Your Kids Push Your Buttons: And What You Can Do About It."

It also sets commercial goods up as a source of happiness and makes parents the providers of kids' contentment. "There's no guarantee that buying things will make them happy," she said. Instead, the more parents give, the more kids expect.

Even kids who get all their wished-for items may be left with Christmas afternoon blues.

"The questions that bombard kids from Halloween on are 'What do you want for Christmas? What is Santa going to bring you?'" Taylor said.

With the retail push starting so early, "there's a very long buildup for a short period of payback," noted Elizabeth Crary, author of "Dealing With Disappointment: Helping Kids Cope When Things Don't Go Their Way." "It's difficult to get all that anticipation resolved in a morning."

Like a gourmet meal gobbled in a few minutes, a chaotic morning can let down kids and parents. "There's this pressure to buy, buy, buy," Taylor said. "Then kids rip through gifts and don't even remember who gave them

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One solution, she suggests, is to focus more on experiences. Take a walk, play a game or get down on the floor and play with those new toys with kids, said Taylor, president of the Center for the New American Dream, a Maryland-based nonprofit that promotes "less stuff, more fun."

Laura Gentry, a Lynnwood mom of sons ages 7 and 10, talks with her kids ahead of time to stave off potential heartbreak. "If it's something I know is not going to happen, I'll explain that, so they're not disappointed on the magic morning (Mom and Dad have lots of pull with St. Nick in our house and Santa won't bring something we nix)," she wrote in an e-mail. "My 10-year-old would like one of those mini-motorcycles, but he understands that \$400 is out of the reach of our budget and asks for more realistic things instead."

To hedge her bets, "I'll also very subtly hype up the sort of gift that they are going to get," she said.

Still, young kids steeped in Santa lore may have "very unrealistic expectations," said Crary, a Seattle parent educator. Mom and dad say a horse can't live in the back yard, but Santa can do anything, right?

If you've got one of these saddened tots, experts suggest a three-pronged approach.

**First, acknowledge a child's feelings.** Say, "That's really disappointing, isn't it? You really wanted that toy." Period. "It's not necessary to make it OK," Harris said.

When a parent spent a lot of time and cash shopping for thoughtful gifts, it's extremely annoying to listen to a child whine in the midst of plenty. But hold off on the "Don't you realize how expensive that is?!" Harris advises.

"That's just disconnecting," she said. "The child doesn't care and doesn't want to hear it. Allowing them to feel disappointed doesn't condone it; it doesn't say, 'I wasn't right for not getting it for you.' "

Instead, validating emotions "allows the child to know he's not wrong to feel disappointed and that you understand," she explained. "It frees him to move on."

Treat disappointment as separate from gratitude. "Being sad they didn't get that PlayStation2 doesn't mean they're ungrateful [for everything else]; it just means they're disappointed," Harris said.

Besides, telling kids to appreciate their wealth of presents won't accomplish anything. "If my mom is telling me, 'How can you focus on one stupid thing when look at all the other toys you got?' I only feel angry and defensive," Harris said. "There's no way I'm going to think, 'Oh, she's really right.' "

**Next, offer coping skills to deal with the strong emotion .** This can range from taking a deep breath, going for a walk or reading a story, Crary suggested.

**Finally, when kids are calm, discuss the big picture.** "It's easy to be thankful with something you like," said Corinne Gregory, president of the Woodinville-based The Polite Child. "We try to work with kids to treat every gift as if it's the one and only, perfect gift they'll get."

Parents can help children understand that "nobody has to give them a gift," Gregory said. The fact a gift-giver took the time to think of the person

and pick out a present deserving gratitude, regardless of what it actually is, she noted.

In her manners class, children practice opening a wrapped box with, say, a cookie inside. Then they open a second one with a plastic spider. If the lessons have sunk in, "the reaction should be the same."

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