



True Christmas spirit - December 2006

When it comes to Christmas presents, kids can have some crazy expectations. So how do you let them down gently?

“What do you want for Christmas?” How many times do children get asked this question? What is the message it gives kids? That Christmas is all about presents and ‘what they will get’. This time of year most parents are tired and concerned about the high expectations their children have of what Santa will bring. So what can you do? First let’s go back to where the problem starts.

I believe there are a number of main influences. Television advertisements and shows, the influx of toy catalogues that appear in your mailbox, their friends and yourself. Add in all the focus on buying gifts for others and here is a huge part of how your child developed expectations of a \$300 miniature four-wheeler or new Xbox complete with a selection of games.

The good news is two of these sources of high expectations are easy to eliminate – the TV and the catalogues. Turn off the telly, put a limit on it of an hour a day or switch to the ABC (no ads). Throw out the catalogues before the kids see them. If you want to look then hide them (parents are usually good at this!). Christmas time is a great opportunity to teach your children about marketing. From age four onwards they are old enough to start to understand these concepts. An easy real life lesson in marketing is when you drive past your local fast food outlet and they want to stop to get the toy. Explain how this kind of marketing creates that ‘have to have it’ feeling.

Unfortunately there’s not too much you can do about the influence of your children’s friends or other people. Unless they read this column and stop asking children what they want for Christmas and instead ask what do you do for Christmas. So that leaves us parents. Time for some self-reflection.

How does your family celebrate Christmas? Is the day’s emphasis on opening presents or do you have other traditions that feature? Children love traditions. They love taking part in the same events year after year because it’s meaningful for them. The presents really should just be a part, albeit a nice part, of the day.

Perhaps you could talk about the true meaning of Christmas and go to mass together. What about a treasure hunt in the backyard or baking Christmas treats? It really doesn’t matter how good they look it’s about doing something together as a family.

It’s also a wonderful idea to teach your children about how to give and help other children who may not get any presents at Christmas time. Do you buy extra Christmas food and place it in a food hamper? The key is to make sure Christmas time isn’t just all about them. Sure it’s a fantastic time of year and children make it really special but Christmas should have many facets apart from consumerism and toys.