

What's in a gift?

Think back. We know you can recall one very special gift you received as a youngster – and from whom you received it! Be it the chemistry set your scientist father brought back from a business trip or the porcelain piggy bank from your best friend, you enjoyed and still cherish the gift because of the giver. Likewise, you remember with pleasure gifts that you've given, made all that more special by the joy of the recipients!

What does a child learn from giving?

Gift giving helps children develop empathy by imagining someone else's desires and needs. Little ones assume their wants are shared by their loved ones and may offer Mom or Dad a favorite stuffed toy. As children grow socially, their gift giving extends to playmates and siblings. It is important at this stage to involve the child in the process, from considering what the other may like, to selecting, wrapping, and presenting the gift. By school age, children are ready to practice true charity – giving beyond their own circle and to the needy.

What does a child learn from receiving?

Receiving comes naturally to children as that's how they're born into this world. Sincere appreciation and the social skill of expressing thanks are what children must learn. When Baby hands you her stuffed toy, do you cradle and kiss it – or cast it away? The day after do you gather up and exchange your child's presents? Or do you say, "What wonderful gifts from your friends!"

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*"And all my toys beside me lay
To keep me happy all the day."
- Robert Louis Stevenson*

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"There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it."

**Edith Wharton,
American novelist**

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Nature or Nurture?

Are children naturally generous and giving? Probably no more so than they're born greedy and selfish. The heart, like the mind, has a lot of learning to do before it matures. Infants form strong emotional bonds to their caregivers and, as their needs are satisfied, begin to match their own moods to their loved ones'. This physiological "matching" is the first baby step on the path to true empathy – the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and truly be concerned about some other person's welfare.

Self or Selfish?

You've taken your darling toddler to play group and watch in horror as suddenly she turns into a monster, snatching a toy away from another and screaming "It's Mine!" Fear not. Your daughter is taking an important social-emotional step: self-assertion. Hand-in-hand with learning how to share with and care for others goes developing a sense of self. Simply put, "self" is a prerequisite of "selfless."

Through imaginative play children act out fantasies and in so doing start to develop empathy for others. A child plays 'king' and banishes the 'prince' from the castle, imagining both the king's great power but also how the cast-out prince feels. Whether playing alone or with another, the child has instigated a social interaction. Increasingly child psychologists are seeing an important connection between positive pretend play in early childhood and the ability to get along socially later in life.

Through cooperative play, children learn to work together. Whether it's planning a tea party, playing a board game, or building a block castle, they take turns, share, and interact as a social team.

Parents

Baby see, baby do. Parents are a baby's first and most favorite playmates and playthings. From birth, kids are ready to play. Songs, rhymes, peek-a-boo, and finger plays are simple social interactions that are stimulating, soothing, and fun for both parent and child.

Playmates

Babies love babies. Sit two 6 month olds together and they'll reach out to touch each other. By 18 months it's important that children spend time with age-mates even if all they're doing is playing beside rather than with one another. By age 3 children begin to interact and, while still possessive, start to share their toys. By age 4 they're real social butterflies, engaging others in fantasies, playing games and taking turns. By age 5 children begin to form real friendships. By school-age kids can feel true empathy, not just for close friends and family but others less fortunate.

Playthings

Toys are important tools for children as they act out their feelings and their fantasies and ready themselves for human society. For babies, begin with mirrors and cuddly soft animals and rag dolls. Toddlers, as they start to role-play, need dolls, kitchen sets, doctor kits, cars and trucks and other realistic playthings. Preschoolers can use props for their make-believe, like dress-up clothes, puppets, and people play sets, and multi-player games and toys. School-age children benefit from activities such as crafts and games that they can share with their friends as well as solitary activities that enhance their confidence, competence and sense of independence.