

## The Spirit of Giving, The Gift of Compassion

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*I open the door.  
In comes the treasured guest.  
In her hands are her gifts  
the gift of time and far-seeing moments,  
the gift of nourishment and wisdom,  
the gift of caring and knowledge,  
the gift of change and self.  
She must have searched her soul for gifts  
as precious as these.*



Store windows are ablaze with a blinding light that radiates from the latest toys, electronics, and fashions that have come to be what our holidays are made of. We are barraged with images of “must have” holiday gifts. Bombarded with countless television ads designed to make children feel they *must* have that toy or the latest fad item, children’s wants become their needs. In our hearts we long to shower our children with everything they want and all that we never had. We do not want them to feel deprived,

disappointed or unfulfilled in any way. It is only natural to want to indulge our children with material items, especially if we have the means to do so. But from experience we know that the glow our children feel from this kind of giving fades in minutes, sometimes as soon as the wrapping is ripped off. Rather than creating a spirit of joy and gratitude in our children, we may have instead created in them an insatiable appetite for “things”, “things” that bring little more than a momentary high followed by a relentless hunger for more and more.

### *The Meaning of the Season*

The holiday season is upon us. Are we in touch with the true meaning of giving? We know that material items do not bring true happiness, rather, emotional happiness is created from an inner sense of serenity, love and gratitude. This holiday season provides an opportunity to further that inner peace in ourselves and our children by giving something more long-lasting and intrinsic than money can buy, the gift of giving to those in need.

Focusing on giving rather than getting is an especially compelling notion when we think about all that children gain from giving of themselves.

- They learn tolerance, kindness, respect and good citizenship.
- They begin to adopt a lifelong habit of giving.
- They become better able to think about others, develop empathy and breakdown stereotypes.
- They see the benefits money can have beyond a new pair of shoes or a CD.
- They begin to see that they can act on their environment to make real changes.

### ***Where to begin***

As you think about giving, consider what kind of charitable experience will be most rewarding to your family, which experiences will most impact them and where the greatest need is in your

community. In suburbs as affluent as Irvine and those surrounding it, where we rarely see hotel families, homeless families or hungry children, it may seem that there is very little need. However, this is not the reality.

**It is estimated that in 2001, there are over 19,000 homeless people in Orange County\*...20% of Orange County children live below the poverty line.\*\***

Just as there are many who need help, there are many ways we can give to those in need. Sometimes we benefit most from giving what we hold onto tightest or what we lack or fear we will some day lack. Think about what you are afraid of losing or areas of your life where you experience scarcity. You may feel you lack time, energy or money. Whatever it is you lack or fear lacking in the future, give it away. For example, if you fear being alone when you are older, offer



your time to a senior without family or friends to visit them. If underneath it all your greatest fear is that you will end up losing it all and have to try to live on social security, donate money to a homeless shelter, time serving at a soup kitchen or clothes you have collected to a charity for destitute elderly adults.

Many parents worry that if they volunteer their time they will have even less time to

spend with their children. One solution is to volunteer as a family because it requires setting time aside to be together. It also strengthens families by providing members an opportunity to work together toward a common goal.

### ***Guidelines for getting kids involved***

As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. If we want our children to develop a sense of caring, compassion, empathy and humanity we need to demonstrate these traits in our own actions. When we give of ourselves, it strengthens our children's ability to internalize this value. Furthermore, children whose parents volunteer are twice as likely themselves to volunteer as adults according to a 1996 study by the Independent Sector.

Beyond watching their parents, kids benefit most from getting involved themselves. With some advanced planning, children can get started at any age, especially if the giving experience involves the entire family. Here are a few guidelines to help make giving a positive, growthful experience for your family.

- When picking a charitable activity for your family, involve your children in the

\*Figure cited by Orange County Homeless Prevention Coordinator Karen Roper.

\*\*Based on the 1998 Motel Families Report prepared by the Social Service Agency.

decision. Have a conversation with them about where they see a need and what types of activity most interests them. Ask questions that encourage them to identify which community needs are important to them. When children are involved in making the decision about what cause to become involved with, they have more ownership over the giving experience.



- Volunteer experiences for children under five years old should be simple, familiar and extremely concrete. For example, charitable gift giving is an excellent option for young children as it is an activity that is familiar to them. Gift giving enables young children to see where their gift is going, making the experience more meaningful and understandable for them. In contrast, dropping a toy in a box may be confusing as it can feel more like throwing the gift away than giving the gift to someone in need.
- Try to think broadly when brainstorming charitable opportunities with your family. For example, for a computer savvy family, volunteering to teach computer skills to older adults may be just the right fit.
- After you have decided what type of charity you want to work with, visit the

organization before committing. Make sure the experience will be appropriate for someone your child's age, that the environment is safe and that the hours for the event are manageable.

- Identify opportunities where your child will be given an important task using skills he/she already has or can develop. This helps the child feel he/she is making a real contribution.
- Start conservatively and think realistically about your time. Begin with a series of volunteer activities rather than a long-term commitment so you can evaluate the experiences. Decide if the activity is something you and your family want to continue and how often you can realistically participate.
- Prepare your children, especially if they are young, for what the experience might be like, for example, what they might see at a soup kitchen. Having a child point to someone who is homeless and say that his/her clothes are dirty can be embarrassing.
- After the activity, talk with your children about their experience. Give them and yourself the opportunity to reflect on what you liked and did not like, what you learned and the ways each of you were affected by the experience. It is important to take time to process and problem solve if necessary.

### ***Extending the giving season***

When thinking about how your family can make the most of giving this season, consider extending your commitment to providing charitable acts throughout the year. Many organizations have plenty of volunteers over the holidays but lack sufficient volunteer resources the remainder

of the year. A similar situation exists in terms of monetary and other donations.

**It is estimated that charitable organizations receive over 40% of their contributions in the last six to eight weeks of the year yet the need exists 100% of the year. \*\*\***

Parents can encourage sustained involvement in charitable giving. One idea is to have a “gift of self night” which entails setting aside one night a week or month designated to volunteering as a family. By putting these service dates on your calendars in advance, your family ensures that they will have a chance to spend time together.

### **Summary**

In the end, costly baubles and fad toys are not what counts. Rather the internalization of the wonder and joy that comes from giving is what is important because what we gain from giving lasts a lifetime.

**The greatest gift we can give our children and ourselves this holiday season is to see that all of us have much to give to this world....**

**the gift of kindness,  
the gift of compassion,  
the gift of understanding,  
the gift of generosity,  
the gift of service,  
the gift of caring....**



**Let the giving begin!**

\*\*\*As reported by family economics expert Dr. Joyce Cavanaugh.

## **About FOR Families**

FOR Families provides information and short-term support to families and individuals living or working in Irvine who need assistance identifying and accessing needed services and resources. The FOR Families staff offers free, confidential consultations to community members to determine their needs and develop action plans to address those needs.

Some of the issues FOR Families addresses include:

- relationship difficulties
- parenting issues
- separation and divorce
- stress and depression
- substance abuse concerns
- financial and legal issues

Though not counseling, FOR Families staff will assist with creative problem-solving, resource linkage and referrals for counseling.

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