

How to reduce gift-giving stress with your kids – a child psychologist's tips for making magic and avoiding tears

Angela J. Narayan, Associate Professor, Clinical Child Psychology Ph.D. program,
University of Denver

Published: December 19, 2025 2:43pm EDT



"Tis the season ... for gift-buying stress.

Photo by Ryan Miller/Invision/AP

As a child, I loved being the center of attention. So it was a problem when my baby brother was born a day before my birthday. For years, I would beg my parents for a birthday gift “one day early.” My laid-back brother remembers thinking, “I don’t care about presents. Just give her mine!”

As an associate professor and child psychologist at the University of Denver who studies child development and parenting, I’ve come to learn about these types of challenges associated with gift giving. The holidays, while a magical time, can also be stressful. Society places an expectation on parents to buy gifts, regardless of their financial circumstances, and children themselves often feel a variety of complex emotions.

How children react to getting presents is partially linked to temperament, which is the variety of ways that children experience, perceive and interact with the world.

Temperament is the precursor to personality – some people are introverts, while others are extroverts. Temperament is partially heritable. That means an introverted parent who feels social pressure to buy many gifts for their shy and easily overwhelmed child may be inadvertently causing stress.

Faced with this holiday conundrum, I'm often asked questions like "Is there a magic number of gifts to give my kids?" or "What gifts will hold my child's attention the longest?"

While there isn't an easy answer to either question, these tips and tricks can help parents be more thoughtful and intentional about gift giving, especially for children who are young.

The age rule

Young children cannot focus on a lot of things at once. A good rule of thumb is that a 1-year-old can focus only on one thing at a time. A 2-year-old can maybe focus on two things at most, and a 3-year-old maybe three things, and so on. Stop at five. Very few children actually need more than five gifts, so feel free to go lower.

The attention rule

I have often searched for the magical gift that will keep my children occupied for hours, and so far I haven't found it. What I have found is that my children – ages 5 and 7 – get excited about the things that I get excited about. So I try to buy things that I think are fun. Ask yourself what you would like to play with if you got to be a child again. I bet your children would be eager to join you in those things.

The games rule

Card and board games are great gifts, often inexpensive, fun for many ages – excepting babies, of course – and capable of holding attention for a long time. Plus, they usually don't take up much storage space. I love giving my kids games that are not only fun but also teach them helpful skills.

Collaborative games for preschoolers and early school-age children like the Fairy Game and Outfoxed teach problem-solving, teamwork and early reasoning skills. Games for elementary-age children, such as Sorry and Battleship, teach kids how to manage difficult situations, like not always being in the lead, being a good sport even if you're behind, and losing gracefully.

Timeless card games like Uno and Memory, and newer ones like Sleeping Queens and Exploding Kittens, are great for using working memory, thinking flexibly, persisting and strategizing. Most importantly, playing games together supports positive family time, which is an excellent antidote to stress, bad moods or boredom.

The pressure rule

Imagine the holiday experience through the eyes of each of your children. Some children relish receiving gifts, like I did. Others, however, may feel self-conscious, overwhelmed by the sensory overload – all the textures, commotion and bright colors, not to mention people staring at them. The elements of surprise combined with the unspoken social pressure to be gracious and well regulated are challenging for any young child.

We expect small children to contain their excitement, delay gratification and react positively to the surprise. And then come up with a polite response. These are all complex requests, rarely directly or explicitly taught. It's no wonder that many children show negative emotions, have tantrums, or even just say, "I'm tired!" during holiday celebrations.

That's why beyond the precise nature of "the perfect gift," we shouldn't lose sight of what we should be doing. And that is investing in togetherness and helping kids learn skills like being patient and taking turns, strengthening memory capacities, planning ahead, not giving up, and that being a team player will pay off later. These skills pave the way for longer sustained attention, focus and concentration, as well as confidence.

My 7-year-old is becoming a skillful chess player because we have taught him the rules and strategy and helped him practice. Maybe this is the real magical gift – not the purchase itself, but the decision to invest in time with your child early.

Angela J. Narayan receives funding from the National Academy of Medicine and the American Psychological Association.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license.