



by Karen Stephens

Bless Children With Gifts That Money Can Never Buy

The best gifts for children are the ones money can't buy. If children don't receive these gifts in daily doses, they'll be short-changed for life, no matter how much money you spend on them. Following are the gifts I'm talking about; more will occur to you. The gifts aren't in any order, and they won't cost you a cent. But they'll be the most valuable gifts you child will ever receive.

Hope and Optimism

Through words and actions, project enthusiasm. Whether it stems from your faith, communing with Mother Nature, or an incurable positive attitude, take time together to cherish life and all the beauty, magic, and love it offers.

A Moral Compass

Standards for behavior and making ethical choices are learned best from parents, not preachers, police or teachers. The golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" may sound old fashioned, but it's never out of style. Parents help children create a life of respectful and supportive relationships if the golden rule is put into practice at home.

Tenderness

Tenderness can take many shapes. A student, Amy, shared this with me. Every night she kisses mom and dad before going to bed. When she was younger, her parents took a vacation alone. But before leaving, her mom placed a lipstick kiss on a Kleenex and put it under Amy's pillow. She's in her twenties now, but Amy still remembers keeping the Kleenex under her pillow so she could "kiss" her parents goodnight, even from afar.

Loving Touch

"My grandmother combing her fingers through my hair," is what a college student shared when asked what relaxed her during childhood. Another student said belly rubs did the trick for her. Discover what tender touch soothes your child.

Healthy Habits

Self-care routines like washing hands, brushing teeth, nutritious eating, and looking both ways before crossing a street are ordinary but important habits parents can pass on to children. They don't come glamorously wrapped; but the habits increase kids' chances for a long, robust life.

Generosity

A habit of giving can be formed early. Help children find ways to share their unique talents and spirit: make cookie boxes for the mail carrier, rake a neighbor's leaves, volunteer at the animal shelter, visit a nursing home, or donate slightly used toys to a program for children.

Family Harmony

Whether parents live together or not, maintain harmonious family relations, including the extended family. Children feel so much safer and cared for when families treat each other with respect and courtesy. The last people children want to see being enemies is their parents.

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Stability and Security

Consistency, predictability, dependability, and reliability: these practices build children's sense of stability. Secure children feel safe and confident to experience a world of wonders beyond the home.

Fun and Laughter

Never miss a chance for spontaneous family fun. It's *never* a waste of time to enjoy each other. And nothing bonds like a shared belly laugh! So dig into pillow fights, go sledding, swim in a pool, make up silly knock-knock jokes, draw funny faces on a foggy shower door.

Family Heritage and Tradition

A mother from Nigeria brought in a cooking project to her preschooler's classroom. Together she and her son taught children how mashed fried plantain was made. It was a snack no one else in the class had eaten before. The children were at first surprised to hear the family ate it often, but they soon learned why. Not only did the plantain taste good, but the kids loved being able to eat it in traditional Nigerian fashion. Mom and son taught them how to cup their fingers together to scoop the plantain directly from the bowl to mouth. The ultimate in finger food for adventurous preschoolers!

Reassurance

Children are so vulnerable; almost completely dependent on parents. It's not unusual for children to endure fears, both real and imagined. Needless to say, it's a gift to children when parents offer calm reassurance. A student wrote: "I had terrible nightmares when I was a child. When I would wake up screaming and crying, my mom would come into my room with a glass of water. Then she would wind my favorite music box, and that was what really calmed me down." Now that's a skilled parent. Through trial and error mom discovered a simple, effective way to smooth childhood's rough waters.

Gratitude

In our child care program, the children conducted a bakery project. As a final activity, they held a bake sale of goods they prepared. They actually raised \$136.25! When teachers asked what they wanted to do with the money raised, the children decided to donate it. They voted to give their earnings to the "red kettle" charity, the Salvation Army. From the children's donation letter dictated to a teacher, here are my favorite lines: "We studied bakeries at our school, and we decided to give our money to you to help people. Thanks for your good work, and we hope you have fun during your job."

Gratitude spilling from compassionate hearts is a lovely thing to see in action, especially when the selfless thanks comes from 19 young children.

Work Ethic Pride

A reader e-mailed one of her proudest parent moments. Her son wanted a garbage bag to pick up all the litter on a neighborhood road. For safety, she joined him. As they walked together they picked up 111 pieces of trash! The time the parent spent with her son nurtured a conscientious work ethic. Her boy started a job and kept at it until it was done. They were both rightfully proud.

Active Compassion

For self-respect and a sense of belonging, every child likes to feel their life makes a positive difference to others. To bestow that gift, provide children with opportunities to make life a little better for someone else. It can be as simple as feeding backyard wildlife or helping an elderly neighbor to bring in groceries.

Self-Restraint and Moderation

When raising children, restraint means many things. Parents give children the gift of patience and self-control when we refrain from using demeaning language or hurtful discipline. Resisting substance abuse that impairs health and thinking is a huge gift. When we avoid over-eating or over-spending habits, we also pass on gifts of moderation.

And so you see, there are many ways to bestow a worthwhile gift on your child. It turns out that the best things in life *are* free.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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