Set gift-giving limits, preserve relationships…

Communication is Key to Holiday Sanity

INSERT YOUR TOWN NAME HERE, Iowa—Children benefit from relationships with grandparents, aunts and uncles and other extended family members. These relatives express love in many ways, including gift giving which some parents say can be excessive and difficult to manage. Finding ways to set limits and preserve relationships can be accomplished with clear, respectful, assertive communication skills, says Kristi Cooper, Family Life Specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. “Assertive communication can work wonders in channeling well-meaning generosity for your child’s benefit.”

Below are a few of Cooper’s suggestions:

Avoid Blame—Using “I messages” is a communication tool that reduces the chances that grandparents and other relatives will become defensive, increases the likelihood of problem solving and preserves relationships. You own your feelings and do not blame the other. Notice the difference between these two statements. Which feels blaming?

A. “You are always giving the children junk. What were you thinking?”
B. “I am concerned that the children have too many toys.”

The ‘A’ statement is an example of “you messages” that blame and provoke arguments. The ‘B’ statement is an example of an “I message” that allows the speaker to claim his/her own perspective without blaming the receiver. “I messages” often start with the words “I feel, I want, or I need . . .”

Notice the use of ‘I messages’ in this conversation opener:
“I would like to talk to you about something that is very important to me. I value our relationship and appreciate your generosity towards my children. I am concerned that the children have too many toys. I need your help to find ways to manage the amount of things my kids receive.”

Stay Calm—Tone of voice, body language and choice of words all have an impact on the outcome of a conversation. When emotions rise in us, and in others, it is a signal that something important is being discussed. It is a good time to find common ground through a technique called “AIKIDO” communication. This 4-step tool helps restore harmony and begin solution seeking with overly generous grandparents and other relatives. Notice the “I messages” used in each step. Start with a deep breath to calm your body and collect your thoughts.
**Step 1 Alignment** – As a parent, put yourself in the grandparents’ shoes and see the situation from their perspective.

“I would want to feel special to my grandchildren.”
“I can see how fun it is for you to see joy in your grandchildren’s eyes.”

**Step 2 Agree** – Find common ground.

“I agree that we both love the children deeply and want the best for them.”

**Step 3 Redirect** – Move the conversation forward.

“I value our relationship and want to work this out together. Let’s find a time before the next holiday to talk about this.”

**Step 4 Resolve** – Begin the solution seeking with a suggested action step.

“I am confident we can find gift ideas for the children that will strengthen your bond with them and be manageable for our family. Let’s make a list of ideas and see what feels right for you and me.”

These four steps may smooth the way for some great problem solving, says Cooper. She provides additional tips for communicating with relatives during the holidays at ReclaimYourHolidays.org under “Creative Gift Ideas,” or specifically at [http://bit.ly/1e9qfKk](http://bit.ly/1e9qfKk).

The "Reclaim Your Holidays" initiative is a program of the University of Northern Iowa Center for Energy & Environmental Education in partnership with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. It is funded with support from the Resource Enhancement and Protection Conservation Education Program and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Solid Waste Alternatives Program. INSERT YOUR ORGANIZATION NAME HERE is a project partner.

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ss/10/09/13