The Holidays: A Bit More Giving, a Bit Less Getting

By RON LIEBER

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Some people react to my obsession with parenting, money and values by assuming that it has little to do with them. Take my friends in a low-key Midwestern state, who are both public-sector employees. Wasn’t this topic, they wondered, something that only affluent suburban parents or private-school people needed to worry about?

But then came the holidays. The spending. The (endless) wrapping. The grandparents’ determination to grant every wish. And the management of their older child’s high expectations, which seemed to come out of nowhere. Then, they got it.

So how do we begin to change the tenor of the season without becoming an army of Scrooges?

One way to start is to make generosity part of the holiday routine. Below are some ideas worth trying. But if you have others that you’ve tested in your own family, please put them in the comments or jot me a note, and I’ll highlight a few of them in a future post.
1) THE TOY GIVEAWAY This tip comes from my cousin Celine Faccini-Krimston, the mother of two boys and an early-childhood educator herself. When her kids get new toys, they must also pick out some old ones and give them away to other children who don’t have as many.

There is a basic logic to this: If you want new things, then you’re probably done with the old ones. But the values piece is key, and she’s driven it home over the years by having her kids take the toys they’ve outgrown and hand-deliver them to organizations that will put them to good use. One recent recipient is a school for homeless children.

2) THE BLANK CHECK If you give children money so they can buy whatever they want most, consider the possibility of sending two checks instead of one.

Make out one check to the child. With the second check, however, leave the “To” section blank. Then, send instructions, asking the child to give the money to a person or organization that’s trying to do some good in the world. You might ask the child to send you a note explaining where the money ended up, so the giving also becomes an exercise in articulating what moves him most and why. Including a self-addressed stamped envelope can help the recipient remember to close the loop.

If you’re the gift-card type, you could try sending one from Donors Choose, which allows a recipient to direct money to teachers who have made specific requests for materials that their town or city cannot provide.

I’ve done this with my daughter, who happened to be in a tie-dye phase at the time. On a lark, we did a search on the site for those keywords, and we were able to help a classroom full of kids in New York City create their own psychedelic shirts.

3) FAMILY GIVING If you’re like many families, you probably give away a chunk of your charitable budget at the end of the year. That’s when the holiday spirit (or the tax-deduction deadline) may move you most, and nonprofits are likely to be soliciting heavily.

So here’s something to try: Keep every one of the direct-mail pieces that lands in your mailbox. Then, sit down and review them with your offspring. What appeals to them and why? Who needs help that they didn’t even know about?

This year, my wife and I plan to let our 7-year-old daughter help decide how we divide our giving budget. We’re going to take 100 pennies and divide them on our dining room table to show how we allocated our donations last year among our alma maters, our synagogue, her school and social-service agencies here and abroad. Then, we’re going to see whether she thinks the pennies are divided correctly and let her move some of them if she chooses to. That way, she’ll be in on the decision making. (Throughout the year, she makes her own decisions about where to give away part of her allowance.)
There are other ways to handle this too. You might simply hand over 5 percent of your charity budget to your child or children and let them decide where it goes. If you have more than one child, you could ask that they decide together, or you could split the money and let each child do what she or he wants. Every year, consider increasing the budget a bit so that you’re less in control.

In our family, we’ve turned over the last night of Hanukkah to giving, not getting. But you could do this Dec. 23 or Dec. 26 or the day after Thanksgiving or whenever it’s convenient.

Or perhaps you already have. If so, how did it go?

Ron Lieber is the Your Money columnist for The New York Times. He is the author of the forthcoming “The Opposite of Spoiled,” about parenting, money, values and raising the kinds of children all parents want to push out into the world, no matter how much money they have (Harper Collins, February, 2015). He hosts regular conversations about these topics on his Facebook page and welcomes comments here or privately, via his Web site. The Opposite of Spoiled appears on Motherlode on alternating Thursdays.