

**F**or those of us who celebrate it, Christmas can be a joyous festival all about family. Of course, it's also a time for sharing gifts with our nearest and dearest; but in our eagerness to treat our loved ones to something special, it can be easy to lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas.

"The pressure of consumer culture is all around us, and it's impossible to avoid at the best of times, but particularly at Christmas," says counsellor and psychologist Libby Bentham of Discovery Bay's Integrated Medicine Institute. "Those with low levels of wellbeing are more likely to buy into this culture in order to feel better about themselves. But it actually has the opposite effect, and causes a downward spiral that is detrimental."

### Keeping up with the Joneses

This detrimental effect is particularly pronounced in children and teens, who may be particularly sensitive to the perception and criticism of their peers, and may not yet have fully developed their sense of self-worth. Libby explains, "Rejection from peers seems to predict higher levels of perceived consumer culture pressure, which in turn predicts higher levels of materialism and overspending. This creates a vicious cycle, where children or teens are left still feeling socially isolated."

This sense of isolation, and the unhealthy preoccupation with filling that gap, may manifest itself in a number of ways, including excessive consumerism – behaviour that Libby says can become compulsive. "A consumer addiction will start as a preoccupation with buying or acquiring more 'stuff' and the need to always be 'in style'. Gradually people might lose interest in other activities that were

## Spirit of the Season

### Kate Farr takes a look at the commercialisation of Christmas, and suggests a few festive alternatives that put over-consumption firmly back in its box

previously enjoyed, becoming defensive, leading eventually to denial – blocking the awareness that this behaviour has become destructive, and justifying it as relief from stress. Ultimately, it turns into measuring their sense of value as a person on the possessions they have."

As parents of impressionable children, it can also be wise to look at our own habits and language. Light-hearted talk of 'retail therapy' may inadvertently reinforce the idea that the best way to brighten your day is buying something new. But where most adults can recognise that this quick-fix approach doesn't

address serious problems, children and teens may not have the ability to reason this out.

Libby clarifies, "The motive [for consumer addiction] is often about seeking to fill a hole that a person feels inside themselves. Spending may temporarily offer relief, but in the long run, the hole is still there. Therefore as parents, it is important to try to foster a lifestyle that builds a core sense of self-worth."

### Daring to be different

Building self-worth begins with identifying and enforcing the right boundaries for your family. And



when it comes to applying those principles to the festive season, Libby suggests that parents begin by asking themselves questions such as 'What do the children have?' 'What do they need?' and 'What is our financial situation like?' Once you have those answers, it's easier to decide on – and stick to – a budget for gifts.

And while Libby suggests keeping spending low, she also suggests leaving wiggle room in the budget for a 'big year' every now and then. "Refuse to buy into the societal pressure of having to have a 'perfect' Christmas," she says. "Relax and enjoy the time together, and remind children what Christmas is about, according to your own philosophy."

Another trick Libby suggests employing when it comes to Christmas shopping for children comes in the form of an easy mantra: "Something they want, something they need, something

to wear, something to read." This leaves plenty of scope for practical gifting with a few treats that will be genuinely well-received.

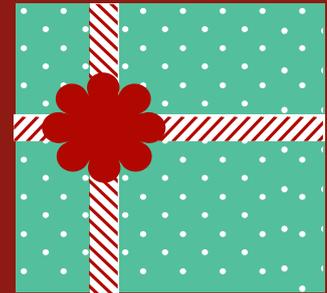
And for parents looking for alternatives to the traditional avalanche of gifts in favour of making lasting memories, Libby suggests thinking outside the box. "Take a family photo, decorate your apartment and Christmas tree together, involve the children in Christmas dinner preparation, head to festive events such as carol services or theatre shows as a family, do something for charity or take a special family outing," she says.

"Give simple stockings filled with small gifts including things like a piece of fruit... try something different!" **B**

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- Integrated Medicine Institute, [www.imi.com.hk](http://www.imi.com.hk)

**GET KIDS TO GIFT THEIR TIME**



- Impact HK began with the idea of one act of kindness per month for the underprivileged in Hong Kong, and has since grown to a full programme of monthly initiatives, events and fundraisers. Older kids and teens may benefit from joining one of the group's monthly Kindness Walks, where donations of clothing, toiletries and food are distributed in various locations around the city. Visit [www.impacthk.org](http://www.impacthk.org)

- Feeding Hong Kong's weekly Bread Run involves willing volunteers of any age in collecting surplus bread from bakeries to send to schools, shelters and charities. The organisation also invites groups to host Food Drive initiatives, collecting non-perishable items such as rice, cooking oil, and canned and dried goods to redistribute to a variety of good causes. Visit [www.feedinghk.org](http://www.feedinghk.org)

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