

UNPLUG YOUR HOLIDAY MACHINE

©2005 Gwynne Spencer

Are you dreading the holiday season because your kids get the Gimmes? Do you fantasize about cutting the plug off your TV to silence the pitchmen? Here are some ideas adapted from the perennially popular "Unplug the Christmas Machine: A Complete Guide to Putting Love and Joy Back Into The Season" by Jo Robinson and Jean Staeheli (\$10, Quill) now in its 13th printing, and still one of the best guides to decommercializing your family holidays.

1. Make an activity calendar with one non-shopping activity per day. There are plenty of possibilities--everything from decorating windows to making tree ornaments to working on family photo albums. Brainstorming the list with kids is always a great way to start to unplug your holiday machine.

2. Limit TV watching. Most kids watch 10,000 commercials a year during their twenty hours a week of tube-feeding. Disconnecting them may produce howls of agony, but think of it as a holiday "detox."

3. Read out loud at least once a day. Build a family holiday library with one new holiday title each year (I keep my collection in the turkey roaster). If you think you don't have TIME to read here are some sneaky ways to make moments: Read during commercials (especially commercials for toys). Read while you wait in the car. Read to kids in the bathtub. Listen to books on tape in the car.

4. If you are really brave, make a rule that "If You See It On TV There is No Way I Will Buy It For You" This will solve 99% of the craziness that accumulates during the frenzied time when most retailers gross 50% of their annual income! Research shows that kids who learn to delay gratification have an enormous intellectual advantage over the

GIVE IT TO ME NOW crowd.

5. Come up with new traditions and stick to the ones you have. In this terror-filled world where you can hardly count on the sun rising in the east, kids need to know that some things just won't change. If you ALWAYS watch the Wizard of Oz, in spite of howls of protest, DO it.

6. Teach kids how to give. Find a local charity that kids can wrap and deliver gifts to and then DO it. Help them form a concept of charity that will last all year. Take them with you when you go to donate blood. Have them make gift baskets for children less fortunate than they are. Making it as easy to give as it is to receive.

7. Take lots of walks, take time to appreciate sunsets and clouds, wonderful songbirds and life all around. It's hard to teach kids the preciousness of life all around if they're parked in front of the tube or umbilically attached to the CD player. Get OUT of the house and INTO the world.

8. Write down the marvelous things that happen this year, celebrate the goodness all around, toast the holiday spirit of love and joy and hope for peace. Then, next year's unplugging efforts will have a set of notes to get you started. Write a holiday newsletter for family and friends and send it in JULY!

9. Getting your holidays back to being special and sacred often means making a list of things you absolutely positively will NOT do. If you hate cookie exchanges, JUST SAY NO! If you loathe caroling, DON'T DO IT. Guilt is the one gift you don't need more of at this time of the year.

10. Most importantly, be in the moment. Smell the season. Touch your kids' hearts and minds. Savor the fresh smell of rain or pine. Don't assume there will ever be another moment like this. Being in the present--it's the best gift of all.

Gwynne Spencer, author of "Recipes for Reading" (Linworth Publishing), a

compendium of snack recipes related to children's books, can be reached at
gwynnespencer@aol.com