

Agony Aunts TO THE RESCUE

Writers Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge have been friends for years. They agree about most things, apart from Christmas. Karen loves it; Georgia dreads it. Here they advise on some Christmas worries

KAREN SAYS

I've always loved the Christmas season. I start feeling the festive atmosphere in November, when the decorations begin going up around London. Christmas in California, where I'm from, was always warm and sunny; I remember meeting friends under a lifeguard station at the beach on Christmas Day. So I look forward to spending most of the holiday in England, where it's cold and rainy outside and warm inside.

The Grinch by Dr Seuss was my favourite story when I was little. I've always loved the smell of Christmas trees and cloves, the twinkly lights, the pumpkin pies – now I live here, I'm on to the mince pies as well. The problem is, it takes me until Easter to fit into my clothes again.

I'm always overwhelmed and exhausted at Christmas – help!

A Yes – help is exactly what we all need. When my children were younger, I was always frantic at Christmas. With nativity plays, carol concerts and parties to go to, I'd be busy every second right up through Christmas Eve, when I'd be up at midnight, still wrapping presents, and panicking I wouldn't finish everything.

Then I got smart. Nobody said I had to do all that wrapping, cooking and envelope addressing myself. What was I thinking? Christmas isn't about being a martyr. If you're stressed, your whole family can get stressed, then the magical Christmas you've worked so hard to create ends up with everyone on edge. So hire help (which you can do right here through *The Lady*). Plenty of people would be delighted to earn a little extra at this time of year.

But there's another, even more gratifying, solution – give up feeling compelled to provide the perfect Christmas. It's far more fun if everybody chips in, so let your

children help. Now I let mine do as much as they can. They decide what to give each other and help me do loads of wrapping. I handed over the pie baking. They also peel Brussels sprouts and mash the potatoes. Their favourite thing to do is decorate the tree and the house. Hallelujah!

How can I make a happier, more magical Christmas for my family?

A Your happiness is just as contagious as your stress, so if you do what you enjoy most, the pleasant atmosphere will rub off on everybody. For years I've loved taking my family to the Continent for the Christmas markets, where we buy baubles, eat bratwurst and drink *glühwein* – not a bad start. Markets in Germany and Brussels are by far the best; the others are too commercial and somehow don't quite get it.

Then my mother comes from the States and we hunker-down here for the holidays. She loves doing projects with the children, so we put on endless Christmas music (Frank Sinatra is a favourite) and sit at the dining table for days making decorations. One year she brought over an entire mini Christmas village, complete with teeny little coloured lights, for them to paint. This year I think we're on for making yards and yards of garland. We do the annual Ravensburger Christmas puzzle, which is loads of fun and very addictive. You can get it at WHSmith.

We've never gone out and bought a big, fabulous tree. When our oldest was a toddler, we bought a teeny little tree, which wasn't much more than a branch. Every year our children insist we bring it in and decorate it. It has outgrown its pot, and we keep saying we'll replant it so it will grow beautifully. But every year we forget. So we drag in our straggly, well-loved tree and smother it with trimmings again.

GEORGIA SAYS

My heart sinks when the first Christmas tree goes up in September. I'm allergic to plastic wreaths and corny Muzak, and I dread the thought of battling through crowds of shoppers to find presents for the family. I don't even like the food. Where's the law that says we have to eat dried-up turkey breast and Brussels sprouts just because it's Jesus's birthday? But there are parts of Christmas I love; particularly decorating our resin spruce tree from the farm next door, with carols from the choir of King's College, Cambridge. I also look forward to the ritual of putting sooty thumbprints on the biscuits we leave out for Father Christmas and sliding lumpy stockings on the end of my children's beds.

My daughter's school friends always get astonishingly expensive presents. I don't want to disappoint her, but I can't compete.

A When I was a teenager, my average Christmas booty was a dodgy pair of

flares, a letter-writing set (subtle hint from my godmother) and a Terry's Chocolate Orange. At the time, I was very grateful, but teenagers today wouldn't put up with such paltry presents. Last year one of my daughter's friends was given a new mobile phone as well as 10 outfits (chosen with the help of a personal shopper at TopShop), a charm bracelet from Links of London and some customised Nike trainers. According to the drumbeats on the London day school circuit, one 10-year-old even got a gold-plated iPhone. I do slightly wonder how these parents are going to keep the excitement going next year. What can their children possibly look forward to when they've got everything already?

If you haven't got the money or the inclination to compete in the Christmas present rat race, it's a good idea to let your child know as soon as possible. Explain what your limits are and what kind of budget to expect. Listen sympathetically to her protestations that absolutely everyone in their class is getting a new laptop

this year, then ask her to come up with an alternative Christmas list. You may be quite surprised to find how modest, even old-fashioned some of the requests might be. My daughter's current list includes a bottle of Marc Jacobs Daisy scent, but she'd also like some hairclips, a netball and a new water bottle for her guinea pigs.

My mother-in-law really does give my children itchy jumpers every year. They dread them. What can I do?

A Itchy Christmas jumpers are a great British tradition, along with novelty soap, sagging paper chains, piped Slade (everybody's havin' FUN) fairy lights with wonky bulbs that have mysteriously slithered into a tangle in the box under the stairs, and The Queen's Speech.

But your children may not yet see the point of them. If they were looking forward to an Xbox, they may not be as polite as you would like when they open Granny's present and find a wonky hand-knit-

ted jumper, even when she's added their initials on the front in big loopy letters.

If their faces fall she may get offended and hit the sherry. So explain that being tactful about presents you don't like is an important life skill that they may as well learn now. Tell them to look hard at what they've been given and come up with one nice, truthful comment. 'Thank you Granny, lime green is my favourite colour' could be a winner, but if not, the old faithful standby is to tell her how kind she's been to take so much trouble over their present.

In the New Year, take them to see her, all dressed up in their jumpers, so she knows they've been worn. Then discreetly take them to the charity shop. There are plenty of people who might like them. ♦

SEVEN SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL PARENTING by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge is published by Bantam Press at £12.99. Their new book on sibling rivalry will be published on 1 April 2010. Visit their website at: www.karenandgeorgia.com.

