



Rachel Carlyle

Today's children have it all, so why do we give them yet more presents?

When money expert Martin Lewis was filming a hard-up family for one of those TV money makeover shows, he quickly discovered a major reason for their debt: buying presents. "It turned out that whenever a kid in the class had a birthday, they would buy them a present at £10 each – so they'd have to put £300 a year aside. It was the same with Christmas," he says. "I thought it was mad, but I've since discovered they are not the only ones."

He then wrote a blog on his website, www.moneysavingexpert.com, advising parents to stop buying so many Christmas presents for friends' and neighbours' children. In our house the Christmas list numbers 29, and that's before you even take close family into account. In fact, it's got to the point where if someone else suggests "shall we just buy for the children this year?" I'll scream, never mind the children: what about my scented candle?

Lewis was quite taken aback by the huge response to his blog, which unanimously applauded his courage in speaking out against the tyranny of presents-for-all. "People on the website were writing, at last someone has said it. You feel so curmudgeonly, because no one wants to look tight. But I really think that we're all buying children too many presents – piles of useless rubbish that will never be loved or appreciated."

He believes it's a problem on several fronts: it puts pressure on people who can't really afford to stump up, it's a bad use of everyone's limited resources and the environment, but worst of all it sends the wrong message to our children. His website has an email form you can send to your friends, called a Pre-Christmas NUPP (No

Unnecessary Present Pact. See www.moneysavingexpert.com/nupp).

He admits this approach could offend some people, as Karen Doherty, co-author of the *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* (Bantam, £12.99. See Bookshop, page 82), discovered. She used to run herself ragged buying gifts for her friends' children in the States. "I'd be spending days packing up 10 or more packages. It was a huge undertaking."

"But one year my closest friend said, why don't we stop this? My children get too much and so do yours. At first I was really offended – it seemed a bit mean-spirited, but then I thought, hallelujah. It was such a freedom because it put an end to needlessly buying stuff."

Psychologist Donna Dawson suspects that the current trend for gifts-for-all is more about the status of the giver than wanting to treat the child. "You're saying, look what I can afford to spend on your child. It starts becoming indicative of how much disposable income

you have. Then there are the mental calculations – 'if I've spent £20 on your child, you should spend £20 on mine'. It's easy to get sucked into the one-upmanship and it takes a brave person to go against the tide – no one wants to be thought of as stingy. It's up to each group of friends to decide amongst themselves how they are going to approach it. But I certainly think parents should nip it in the bud."

Tanith Carey, author of *How to be an Amazing Mum When You Just Don't Have the Time: The*

Ultimate Handbook for Hassled Mothers (Lion Hudson, £7.99. See Bookshop, page 82), has 17 nieces and nephews to buy for, as well as seven godchildren, but she doesn't buy for friends' children. She's a great advocate of "experiences" rather than presents – such as a trip to the theatre or cinema. "It's something they remember much more clearly than some piece of plastic, because they've spent some time with you," she says. "Failing that, I buy a book and write an inscription in it. Given some of the

rubbish toys out there this year, I think that's the best option."

Martin Lewis has a radical suggestion: together with your friends, work out how much you all spend on presents for each others' children, then spend part of that on buying your own child a bigger present – something they really want. "My aim is not to stop festive fun but to challenge the blithe, habitual nature of present-giving," he says. "Spending time making things that others appreciate or just being more considerate is more in keeping with the real spirit of Christmas." And there won't be so many thank you letters to write, either. **S**

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