

Opting for meaningful, conscientious or alternative Christmas gifts

An independent school made the headlines recently by asking parents not to spend more than £50 on Christmas presents for teachers. No doubt the request was made with good intentions to allay any pressure parents might feel to spend that amount, or to 'keep up with the Joneses'. But the resulting criticism of the request needing to be made at all does raise an important point worth reflecting on: as a society, spending an [estimated additional £500 to £796 per household](#) over Christmas (with many families likely to far exceed this), are we overdoing it?

It doesn't take long for Christmas spending to add up! Spending just £5 on a number of your children's teachers, £10 on a few different Secret Santa exchanges with colleagues and friends, and £15 or so on members of your extended family, quickly adds up. Combine this with the amount we spend on gifts for our immediate family and closest friends, Christmas cards, trees and decorations, and festive food and drink, and it's easy to find you have spent a small fortune.

On top of the small fortune that is spent, I dread to think how many stocking-fillers and Secret Santa gifts end up discarded, how much extra food waste is created over Christmas, and how much wrapping and decorations end up in landfill. Apparently during the 2017 festive period [54 million platefuls of unwanted food would have been thrown away](#) along with 1 billion Christmas cards, 83 sq km of wrapping paper, 125,000 tonnes of plastic packaging, six million Christmas trees, and 4,200 tonnes of aluminium foil.

So while many people will budget efficiently for what they spend, and many others will find themselves going over budget, the question for everyone remains. Is it worth it, and is this the best way to use this amount of money?

I don't want to be a scrooge and I'm not at all against giving gifts at Christmas. But when it's all added up in this way, and when we realise how much we waste each Christmas, it seems to make sense to reflect on whether there might be better ways to spend the same amount of money. Whether we buy less expensive but more meaningful gifts; whether we purposefully buy less wasteful or more conscientious gifts; or whether we decide to buy alternatives to gifts altogether, to support those among us who, for different reasons, don't have the option to overspend at Christmas.

Meaningful gifts

It is no secret that teachers work incredibly and increasingly hard, and gestures of appreciation from parents and pupils are always welcome. But spending £50 on a gift to show gratitude to teachers is too much and is just one example of spending that is unnecessary. During my time as a subject teacher I remember being most chuffed to receive a hand-written letter or card from a pupil or parent. For most teachers, that would be all they would really want to receive!

Our loved ones similarly don't want us to spend more than we can afford on presents, and will be happier to receive something that shows we have thought about them, than something that is simply expensive. If we give a book, album, or painting, for example, that we think they will really enjoy or benefit from, or if we give them something practical to improve their day-to-day lives, that will do more to show that we care.

We tend not to give children enough credit in this respect, either; we think that if we don't give them what they have asked for that they will be disappointed, and might even feel unloved as a result! And while they may well be disappointed in the short term, giving expensive gifts should clearly not be confused with showing love. What's more, just as disappointment at not receiving everything they asked for will only be short term, elation at receiving what they asked for only lasts about as long as a sugar rush, too. We all already know this, but we put ourselves under such pressure at Christmas and get caught up in the mania of present buying, that we sometimes forget it. Meaningful gifts for children don't have to cost the earth and, in fact, Christmas is a good time to talk to children about the relative cost of presents, and to ask them about what presents they think would offer the best value. We might be pleasantly surprised at what they say, too.

Conscientious gifts

There's also an increasing awareness of the problems associated with fast fashion, there being more plastic on the planet than we know what to do with, and there being no end in sight to the amount we dump into landfill, especially after Christmas.

Yet even when we know all of this, we can still feel under pressure to 'just buy something, anything' for that Secret Santa gift, or for someone who has at the last minute accepted an invitation to a festive gathering, or to fill up our children's stockings, or to find an extra festive decoration before guests arrive for Christmas! We think we just have to buy something, so we do, regardless of whether the item will only end up in landfill by January. We all do it, and we all know we do it – but it seems as though no one can stop until everyone stops.

Why don't we embrace the idea of buying gift vouchers rather than thinking that getting anything physical is better than buying a voucher? Or why not agree a theme with your Secret Santa group to only give gifts that can be eaten or drunk and so don't contribute to landfill? Or perhaps buy your immediate family tickets to the theatre or, depending on how much you normally spend, a family trip instead of any gifts at all!

We can also look for environmentally friendly versions of the gifts we'd like to give. Instead of buying off-the-shelf packaged gift boxes of cosmetics, find a retailer that sells ethical cosmetics in non-plastic packaging, and make a gift box yourself. Instead of plastic toys, cups or figurines, why not look for wooden or bamboo alternatives? Or [this list of presents recommended by teachers](#) offers some great suggestions for presents that are good for children, too.

Alternative gifts

I heard on the radio that the number of children in temporary accommodation is [at its highest for 11 years](#), meaning that one in every 103 children in the UK will be technically homeless over Christmas (living in temporary accommodation and waking up on Christmas Day in a B&B, hotel or hostel). Meanwhile the weather will continue to get colder, and there are many families who will go hungry on Christmas day.

This puts overspending on gifts into perspective – so there are many alternative gift ideas that we can take up to try and support those in need at this time of year, too.

We could ask our loved ones not to buy us a present at all this year, and instead ask for a donation to an organisation like Crisis which, [for £28.18, will guarantee a homeless person a much better Christmas](#) with company, a Christmas dinner, a bed for the night, and much more support. Or for a Secret Santa exchange theme, why not agree to all buy something from [CAFOD's World Gifts catalogue](#), so that together you can donate essential items for families living in poverty around the world – from teaching someone to read for £10, or buying a toilet for £85.

Or, if we don't want to miss out on giving gifts to our friends and family, there is always the opportunity to do a slightly larger food shop and donate extra items to a local food bank. At Christmas, food banks create Christmas hampers which have more festive food and special treats than are usually available during the rest of the year. Why not forgo that extra bottle of wine, or a couple of those after dinner cheeses, and donate the money you have saved, or even a whole hamper, to your [local food bank](#)?

I was recently approached by two Christmas charities to ask for the school's support too. "The Peoples' Picnic" asks volunteers to fill a sock with useful items for homeless people, and our charity coordinator Mr Burnett has been collecting some of these socks over the past few weeks – find out more about The People's Picnic on their [Facebook page](#). The [Buckingham Emergency Food Appeal \(BEFA\)](#) was established by OG Mike Buckingham in 1985 and has grown to the point where the organisation now provides the ingredients for 17,000 Christmas lunches, supplying refuges and charities in London and throughout East Anglia. I love how this organisation was started – on a theatre trip to London the Buckingham family saw homeless people sleeping under Waterloo Bridge, and decided to support Crisis over Christmas. Ahead of travelling to support Crisis in offering dinners and shelter for the homeless people, Mike Buckingham realised that, as a farming family, they could actually provide some of the food needed for Christmas meals too.

Another way to support charities at Christmas is to buy the Gresham's Girls latest single! The group has recorded its third Christmas single, but this year sees the first original track, *Christmas Day with You*, on sale to raise money for school charities [The Lord's Taverners](#) and [Farms for City Children](#). The group hopes to raise £1,000 - [the single can be heard here](#).

In a former school we had a caretaker who was on his own at Christmas, so we invited him to join our family. I'm sure he had a nice enough day with us but what I remember most was how rewarding the

experience was for our family to spend the day with him; I recommend that everyone 'adopts' an older or lonely person for Christmas!

There is a never ending list of ways that we can be a little more conscientious about how we spend our time and money over Christmas. So I just hope that between us if we all make small changes we can have a bigger impact on reducing how much we spend on items that end up in landfill, and increase the amount we spend on supporting others in our society.