

The Joy of Gift Giving and Receiving¹



Holidays and other special occasions are an important part of our culture but can be challenging for children with special needs. During the Christmas holidays, you want to give your child opportunities to learn the joy of giving and receiving gifts, without overwhelming their senses with wrapping paper, bows, and the excitement of Christmas morning. Here are some proven strategies from A Shared Vision’s co-founder and EI-TVI Paula Landry to put the joy back into gift giving and receiving for you and your child.

Communication Is Key

The moment you start planning for the holidays, start talking about the experience right away so your child knows what to expect. Explain why Christmas is celebrated and what happens on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. There may be parties and family get-togethers, lots of cooking and eating, wrapping, and unwrapping gifts, and glittery, crinkly decorations, including the ones on the Christmas tree. Talk about the events and what they may be like in terms of

¹ Adapted from “How to Plan a Successful Birthday Party” by Paula Landry

noise, numbers of people, and possible activities. You can sing Christmas carols like “Jingle Bells,” read books about Christmas, or make an experience book about how you baked sugar cookies or found your Christmas tree.

Explore with Your Senses

Let your child engage with items associated with gift giving: wrapping paper, gift bags, tissue paper, bows, ribbon, and cards. Explain what the decorations look like – is there a theme? Give contextual information that your child may not be able to see. Encourage your child to touch the different materials. Talk about the different textures and even the sounds they make – the shiny wrapping paper, the crinkly tissue paper.

These activities offer the perfect time to introduce new vocabulary and concepts to your child.

- New words or phrases to introduce, e.g. surprise, party, wrap, gift/present, ribbon, Christmas stocking or tree, thank you;
- Directional concepts like “in” and “out” with gift bags or boxes; and
- Talk about how you OPEN a present. It’s different than opening a door.

Wrapping Gifts

Why do we wrap gifts? To make them a surprise for the person receiving the gift. The gift can’t be seen by anyone until it’s unwrapped. This might be a difficult concept to explain to a child who is visually impaired.

Allowing your child to help with wrapping gifts gives them the opportunity to build important skills such as object permanence (an object still exists even if it’s covered up or hidden) and joint attention (shared interest in an object or event), to increase vocabulary (see list above) and to set the stage for more complex pretend play.

Wrapping gifts also provides lots of great opportunities for using fine motor skills: folding, ripping, cutting with child-size scissors, using a tape dispenser, removing the sticker from the back of a bow, tying ribbons, etc.

Use fun gift wrap like mylar or tissue paper as they have an interesting texture and make lots of sound – many children love this! Use tape and ribbons sparingly. It’s hard enough to unwrap a present; don’t make it more difficult for the child to open it.

Gift bags are often much easier and don’t take as long to open. This may be a consideration during the holidays or if there are many gifts to be opened.

Take toys out the packaging before gift-wrapping them. It’s no fun for a child to open a gift only to find it’s in a box or plastic that he or she can’t feel through. It’s hard to wait patiently for a toy

to be removed from the packaging. Insert batteries so the gift “works” as soon as it’s unwrapped.

Make Christmas cards by encouraging your child to scribble a message (in braille or print) and sign his or her name. Foam stickers or other tactile objects (buttons, pompoms, sequins, etc.) are also a fun way to decorate and personalize cards and gift wrap. One of my daughter’s friends printed both her and Maddie’s names on a card and then glued yarn over the print to make it tactile. It was such a sweet gesture from a six-year-old.

When there are a lot of gifts to be shared, such as at Christmas, braille gift labels ahead of time and distribute to family and friends to affix to their gifts for the child. All children love to sneak peaks under the Christmas tree to find gifts with their names; a child with visual impairment is no different! If your child isn’t ready for braille or print, use a tactile symbol on his or her gifts such as a small pompom, or ornament affixed to the tag or package. Making tags from corrugated paper or textured paper is another way to make your child’s gifts identifiable.

Opening Gifts

If necessary, familiarize your child with the process of opening gifts by practicing on a gift or two before Christmas morning. Talk about how to open a present, taking some time to look at the gift before setting it down and moving onto the next gift. Your child may not realize that there are multiple presents to be unwrapped or that family is excited to watch the process.

Build extra time into the process of unwrapping gifts to give your child a few minutes to explore and feel each one before it’s taken away and replaced with another unwrapped gift.

Consider the area where the Christmas gifts will be opened (crowded, loud, open, quiet?) and the time of day (will your child be well rested?). What things can you control to best meet your child’s needs? Is there anything that might be particularly stressful that you can “practice” or talk about ahead of time? Does your child have any tactile or sound aversions that could make the gift frightening? If so, work out a system together so your child can anticipate the texture or sound component (“This gift may make a funny sound!,” “There’s a scratchy part on this one!”)

Practice manners! Role play, saying “Thank you!” after each gift has been unwrapped and other appropriate responses to gifts. What should your child say if they get something they already have or aren’t particularly fond of?

Let an adult sit near your child to describe what’s happening, what the gifts are and help hone in on your child’s response. This person can help put bows in a pile or collect wrapping paper for recycling. Give the child a bit of time to feel the gifts – remember it may be difficult for a young child to let go of the gift without playing with it first.

It's Better to Give Than Receive

Giving gifts is a totally different concept than receiving gifts. Too often, a child with visual impairment is in the position of recipient but is not as tuned in to the joy of giving, nor of understanding how happy receiving a gift can make the recipient.

Shop together for a gift and let your child help with wrapping and making the card (print or braille). It's OK if the gift isn't wrapped perfectly! The recipient will surely appreciate the effort. This is also a great opportunity to talk about giving to others.

Talk to your child about what makes him or her happy and then what makes Daddy, Mommy, and siblings happy. How can these things be turned into gifts for each of them?

Consider homemade gifts – your child's picture or handprints, cookies he or she helped make, performing a song – so your child learns that gifts don't always need to be purchased.