

12-02-16 No Child Left Inside

For many years now, I have chosen a theme for Christmas gifts. It has helped with spending plans, to reduce stress and give me some focus for a large family. Some of the themes have included *Let's Get Cookin'* (family cookbook and cooking related items), Read All about It! (books and magazine and journal subscriptions; the gift that lasted all year), *It's in The Bag* (lunch bags, tool bags, all containing gifts) and *Sleep Tight* gave bedding, blankets, pajamas and while the grandkids were still young enough, a washable Douglas stuffed animal. Last year I asked the grandchildren to guess the theme. It was *Fun & Games*. They did well guessing and I discovered I loved Apples to Apples.

This year I decided to go with an environmental theme. Not only it is on my mind on a daily basis, mostly in a worrisome way, but I was concerned about the trend of electronics taking over our children's lives. I have been talking to others about this and am so pleased when I hear that many are refusing to get any electronics this year. One father told me he takes his children to something special and memorable. He thought he might bring them to the Blue Man Group. Some families plan a vacation. Starting new traditions, keeping it simple and affordable are the goals for many. I am not alone with the intent to provide experiences rather than things. Of course, the two can be combined; we all look forward to seeing the excitement and joy on a child's face when a gift is opened.

Even though my grandchildren get plenty of exercise playing sports, they sometimes have to be kicked outdoors, especially in the winter, to get them out of the house. With no device in hand, they are forced to use their imagination. They can have a little help though, enjoying the outdoors, both near and far. So, I started thinking of gifts for enjoying nature. Binoculars, animal tracking books, plant and bird identification books. Gift memberships to places like World's End, Audubon, and the Trustees of Reservations, who all need our support anyway. Maybe a couple subscriptions such as Yankee magazine or National Geographic. I love reading the online journal Orion. It is still a work in progress. I am thinking about new traditions involving the outdoors.

The young ones will get a not-too-big backpack for carrying their own stuff: water bottles, binoculars, snacks, identification books, a whistle, a solar powered flashlight and whatever else I can think of. They don't need much. Dress for the weather, take a walk and let all your senses come alive!

It has been a lot of fun collecting these items. Connecticut's DEP website has a great journal for my daughter's family and numerous booklets for enjoying the outdoors. Thrift shops hold the potential for great finds with new and vintage books on fishing, hiking, kayaking and camping.

I have always included funny things and some musical items for Christmas. When I could not afford much, I could at least give them silly things to make them laugh. One year, it was six ape and monkey masks from the Franklin Park Zoo. We could not stop laughing as we tried them on and as people visited, they tried them on and laughed, too!

While I have no talent for making music, it is important to enjoy it and to provide opportunities for our children. My father sang and played organ and piano by ear. His brother sang professionally and played bass fiddle. So, who knows? Many of my attempts at providing music reside at my home now. The grandchildren never get tired of making noise on drums, recorders, the tin whistle and the harmonicas. They especially love harmonicas! And I figure it fits in with the outdoors theme. I thought of all those movies where the cowboys or the hobo owns little but can amuse himself and others by playing tunes on the harmonica. I found some tiny ones online. They combine music, fun and portability. It is fun just thinking about it!

My youngest son, Eric, has been a great inspiration for this year's theme. He is living in Alaska and while I wish he would return "home" (New England), I must admit he is thoroughly enjoying his stay! Every weekend he, his girlfriend and friends are out fishing, hiking and camping. When they have the long days of extended sunshine, they take advantage of that with more of the same many nights of the week. They have been living an enviable lifestyle, with good meaningful jobs by the day, combined with a love of the outdoors the rest of the time. He even rides his bicycle to work most days! All that exercise helps him to enjoy his love of food!

The title of this column is credited to the 2005 book by Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From [Nature-Deficit Disorder](#)*.

How can we expect them to appreciate nature if they don't know anything about it and haven't experienced it? Children enjoying nature is what he calls *The Abundant Childhood: Nature, Creativity & Health*.

I like the sound of that; The Abundant Childhood. Let's provide it!

The earth matters and our children do, too. Let's bring them together.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax and Plympton. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us