

Why experiences are better gifts for older children

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What should we get for our kids this holiday? As children get older,

giving them something they can experience (live through) instead of material things makes them happier, according to new research led by Lan Nguyen Chaplin, associate professor of marketing at the University of Illinois Chicago.

The research, published in the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, compared the level of happiness [children](#) derive from [material goods](#) with the level of happiness they derive from [experiences](#).

Across four studies with children and adolescents, Chaplin and her collaborators demonstrated that children ages 3-12 derive more happiness from material things than from experiences. However, [older children](#) derive more happiness from their experiences than from their possessions.

"What this means is, experiences are highly coveted by adolescents, not just expensive material things, like some might think," Chaplin says.

She goes on to explain, "Don't get me wrong. Young children do love experiences. Entire industries (e.g., theme parks such as Disneyland) are built around this premise. In fact, young children are ecstatic throughout the experience. However, for experiences to provide enduring happiness, children must be able to recall details of the event long after it is over."

Long after they have unwrapped their Legos and stuffed animals, there will still be a physical reminder to give them a "jolt" of happiness. However, young children can't see or touch experiences after they are over, making it harder for them to appreciate experiences long after the event is over. There's an easy and inexpensive fix though, according to Chaplin.

"Take pictures or videos of family walks, playing in the snow, and birthday parties," she said. "Children are likely going to appreciate those

experiences more if there is something to remind them of the event. Additionally, they'll be able to learn the social value of shared experiences."

Children will remember and appreciate not only the birthday gifts they received, but also the time spent with family and friends as they relive the experience through concrete reminders such as photos and videos.

Since [memory](#) is developed over time, it's likely that children, especially young ones, may not derive as much happiness from past experiences as from possessions. But with age, creating [new memories](#) and exploring new interests may be far more valuable than acquiring new possessions.

More information: Lan Nguyen Chaplin et al, Age differences in children's happiness from material goods and experiences: The role of memory and theory of mind, *International Journal of Research in Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.01.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.01.004)

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