

Santa should phase out coal as punishment in Christmas stockings

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Father Christmas has long been doling out coal to children on the 'naughty list,' but with the climate emergency in mind, isn't it time to phase out this festive punishment?

In the Christmas issue of *The BMJ*, pediatrician Tamsin Holland Brown, and her daughters Lilac and Marigold, make the environmental—and compassionate—case for ending this "outdated and potentially harmful" tradition.

The traditional practice of rewarding well-behaved children with gifts but leaving miscreant ones with [coal](#) in the [festive season](#) persists; lumps of coal are widely available from major online retailers, and the #coalforchristmas hashtag crops up on social media.

However, the authors point out that not only does the burning of this non-renewable fossil fuel exacerbate the [climate crisis](#), but its impact on air quality can also be bad for children's health. "It would be good for goodness' sake if coal was left in the ground", they argue.

Receiving a lump of coal might also have a negative impact on kids' mental health, they suggest.

As the COVID-19 pandemic, war, cost of living crisis, and the [climate emergency](#) have already added to anxieties, the authors suggest fostering friendships, and connections between generations, "might combat anxiety" better than a lump of coal.

The authors also make the case for rewarding 'naughtiness,' citing Greta Thunberg, the eco-activist who inspired millions of children to go on school strikes for climate. As Thunberg says, children "can't save the world by playing by the rules," so these children deserve to be on the nice—not naughty—list, suggest the authors.

So as alternatives to punitive coal, the authors suggest recycled/upcycled gifts, plant-based foods, walks and bike rides in nature, inspiring novels, or even a stick insect.

While the co-authors Lilac and Marigold have admitted that they missed school to attend a climate march in 2019, they point out that "[coal] is a fossil fuel and so giving children [coal means] the adults are being the naughty ones."

We need to "Be kind to the world," they conclude.

More information: The gift that won't keep on giving: ban coal as punishment at Christmas, *The BMJ* (2022). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.o2970](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o2970)

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