



# what do you and they really NEED for Christmas?

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**D**ECEMBER is a difficult month. Expectations soar. Whatever your stage in the adoption process, dreams, memories and societies customs lurk everywhere. Everyone has expectations: you, your friends, relatives, the children in your home and those yet to arrive, but everyone's expectations are different. This mismatch creates disappointment.

To futureproof, for enduring benefit, focus on NEEDS rather than the short-term satisfactions fulfilled by WANTS.

Here's 'why'. Christmas often includes 'partying.' Swathed in the smell, taste, visual and auditory sensory experience of mince pies, gaudy ornaments and Band Aid, our children may have witnessed adults who laughed loudly, lost control then lay comatose. They knew and feared the next stage: the intolerant hangover behaviour. Do they know it's Christmas? You bet they do.

So fast forward a few Decembers and these kids are not 'overexcited'; they are hyper-vigilant, triggered by sensory cues including Bono's voice. You dueting 'feed the wo-orld' with the radio could reignite horrific memories for your daughter. She throws a wobbly, or seasonal morsel, screams 'shut up you \*\*\*\*' and you cringe. Tough, incomprehensible times.

Maybe think of Christmas differently; reframe it as a block of time specifically for therapeutic re-parenting. You fill in developmental gaps and undo some damage, rather than inflict over stimulated experiences on a hurt child. This is future proofing in action. Don't buy loads of presents. Your children don't need things. They need you. Your time, with appropriate attachment generating parenting. Eye contact, snuggling, calm breathing, playfulness, peek-a-boo, walks in nature, long comforting stories, shared laughter, good sleep, reassurance and routine. Teens need this chance to regress too.

Our kids need high structure, high nurture, and low challenge (Theraplay model). Don't allow Christmas to derail their healing process. You can't replace what they missed during infancy with material possessions, stuffed toys and chocolate. You can only fill in those gaps with timely, attuned, loving, playful attention. Focus on the child's NEEDS not adult WANTS.

Refrain from copious decorations and changes from the norm. If you must, put up a small tree, have a few small presents. Spend your time calmly with your children, not frantically shopping for them. Be very, very low key. Don't over stimulate; that will alarm them. Don't fill the house with strangers (or potential abusers as your daughter might see them). Remember that your cousin, aunt, or old school friend

is a stranger to your son and historically this lack of trust protected them.

This is tricky for your friends and family. They shared your journey up Adoption Road. They witnessed your pain, frustration and delight. They WANT to see a 'happy ever after' ending. They struggle to understand why the ungrateful little 'so and so' breaks his toys; and frankly, sometimes, so do you. They are desperate to be a hands-on aunt or grandma and treat him like all other children.

This is why preframing is so important. If you explain to the adults who love you, the hows and whys of therapeutic re-parenting, they are more likely to understand and support you effectively. Instead of gushing over the child, they might cook a meal, clear it

up, load, empty and iron the contents of the washing machine, empty the bins or clean your car. Because that's what you NEED, to increase your therapeutic parenting time.

You might agree a no-gift strategy. So instead of frenetic gift shopping and wrapping, you are able to play with your child or go to bed early. Priceless. If you have to buy presents, use the internet and discard perfection. Send fancy food, posh tea, gift wrapped books. Keep it simple. Your priority is parenting.

'A present for moi? Oh thanks for asking. I'd like a voucher for a monthly professional house clean, a dishwasher, lawn mowed, several of your lovely pies for the freezer, you doing my supermarket run or hoovering, cinema tickets, a massage, a fresh fruit salad, money, sort my computer/iPhone/playlists, resolve techy problems.' Dream. I beg you, dream. Then ask. Requests are powerful.

You will develop your own, often unexpected, traditions. In successive days leading up to our first Christmas, each child was struck with 24-hour sick bug. The 25th saw them bouncy, while my head occupied a bucket. Consequently, our tradition is turkey on Boxing Day, thankfully without the vomit.

Hope you have a calm, nurturing, delightful Christmas. ●

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