

children, and they incorporate a tradition of charity into the holiday. They started an angel tree years ago when they began dating, and the custom continues today.

“We try and pick a girl who is Julia’s age and we shop for her,” Diane says. “In the past two years she has been amazed at what the kids ask for, like socks.” Diane says Julia asks “‘Socks? The little girl like me does not have socks?’ It has made Christmas that much more special for everyone.”

Laurie and James Shields emphasize similar values to their son Elliot.

“We stress the joy of giving and not just receiving,” Laurie says. “I like to have him help pick out gifts for others. We also have participated in programs at church where you donate presents. We have explained it to him as well as a three year old can understand.”

In “Will Your Hanukkah Survive the Christmas Frenzy?” psychiatrist Susan Linn describes ways parents can reinforce the meaning and significance of the Jewish holiday to children, amidst a saturation of Christmas marketing. Linn, who founded and directs Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, says many families forgo Hanukkah gift-giving in favor of meaningful family celebrations. She suggests engaging kids in planning those celebrations.

memories, not merchandise

Blackwell also suggests involving children of all ages in activities and charitable projects.

“Every year parents can do a public service project with their

child and some of the child’s friends,” Blackwell says.

“Most toddlers are interested in activity, not objects,” Blackwell says. “Blowing bubbles, a cooking project, an art project, going out and exploring...really focus on family activities, and kids are okay with that.”

Parents need to ask “how are they going to make the holiday special? What are their holiday traditions?” Blackwell says.

Indulgent relatives can either test or reinforce parents’ resolve to scale back at holiday time.

“It seems over the top when you take into consideration of all the gifts under the tree from extended family,” Diane says. “We stress to grandma not to go overboard,” Laurie says. “But what can you do?”

Blackwell suggests parents explain their holiday goals to grandparents, aunts and uncles and proposes relatives give children booklets of coupons that they can redeem throughout the year for special activities, like a day at the park or a favorite meal in lieu of heaps of presents.

“We’re really going to find pleasure in ways other than getting stuff,” Blackwell advises telling children and family members, “and stick with it until it works.”

“A parent has to model what they ask their child to do,” Blackwell says. “With anything that parents teach their children, it’s important for parents to be consistent and firm.”

Catherine Koppel, a former managing editor at ABC Channel 26, is the associate director of public affairs at Loyola University and a frequent contributor to nola baby & family magazine.