

Voices for VI Children

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Title: ***What Can we Give our Children for Christmas...That Can Also Last for a Lifetime?***

This is the season of giving.

This is the time of year when we begin to think about the gifts we will be giving to our loved ones — particularly, our children. It is also the time of year to think about resolutions and commitments for the year ahead. A commitment can actually become a special gift for a child. What commitments will we make to our children? What will we give them?

One thing we can resolve to give them is the gift of our time, spent together.

With our belts tightened during a thin economy, and fewer resources to spend on impressive, expensive gifts, let's remind ourselves that what children REALLY want from us isn't found in a store!

What young children want most of all is to have close, loving relationships with the adults who care for them — with their parents, with their teachers, and their child care providers. Research tells us that these early, nurturing relationships have long-lasting effects on how children grow and develop, on their ability to learn, and on their ability to form positive relationships with others later in life.

The best thing you can spend on your child is your time.

And quality family-time is a special gift to give your child.

With busy work schedules and other activities, it is no wonder that families find it difficult to spend quality time together. But no matter how busy life gets, it is important for families to connect regularly. Studies show that spending quality time as a family boosts children's self-esteem and promotes healthy social development. It is especially important for your child during the first 5 years of life, when his or her brain is developing rapidly.

Meals are good times to be together as a family. As you prepare a meal, try interacting with children to tell them more about what you're preparing, and ask them to help you as you teach them small tasks. Let your toddler help make the meal – let him or her tear the lettuce for a salad, stir the spaghetti sauce or put napkins on the table.

When you sit down together to eat, children enjoy having the opportunity to talk with you. With your baby, name the foods you are eating and talk about foods your baby loves to eat. What sounds and words does *she* try to say? Ask your preschooler to tell you a story about his day or tell him a story about yours during mealtime. What is he trying to communicate? Encourage children to take turns talking and then listening to what you and others say. Sharing time with your child at mealtimes can help you “hear” and “see” each other, and can help both of you build an appreciation for the joy of language, at the same time strengthening skills that are essential for relationships – and school-age reading and learning.

Routine times can be special when you and your child can have fun and share special moments. Other ideas for spending time together:

Draw pictures, build with blocks, or play ball... Read and share a book every day... Plant and take care of a garden... Set a “play date” together, and let your child choose the activity... Have a family game night... Take trips around the island: visit the beaches, parks, marinas, libraries, and historical sites.

When grocery shopping, talk with your child about what you will buy for dinner, and what his favorite foods are. Let him help count out change for the payment, or invite her help with the bags.

While riding in the car, share the experience by talking with your child about where you're both going. Ask her about her day. Stop someplace new and explore: an overlook, the ferry terminal, a playground. Most importantly — *do things that are enjoyable for you and your child together!*

Many of us are looking for ways to bring meaning to those we love as we approach this holiday season and new year. Share and discover new things with your child, simply by giving him or her the incomparable gift of your attention and time. Make it a commitment for the New Year, too!

Parents are invited to visit The Family Connection in Vitraco Mall, St. Thomas, where resource materials, child-care workshops and learning toys are available. Make it an outing with your child!