

Teaching with Gift Giving

Inayet Sahin

March 31, 2009

As Muslim parents, it is our responsibility to Allah SWT to protect our children from harm and teach them His commandments. Gift giving is a sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, but when it teaches consumerism, endangers the health of our children and aids multinational corporations to exploit the poor and add to the environmental burden, we need to re examine how modern gift giving fits in the Islamic world view.

The U.S. Product Safety Commission has issued over 50 recalls in 2008 due to violation of lead paint standard in children's toys and clothing. The "big name" toy companies are most vulnerable because many of their toys are made abroad, where few incentives exist to keep products clean and green. Lead is only one of the chemicals of concern: Phthalates, BPA and polybrominated diphenyl ether (PBDE) are also turning up in children's blood tests, and are thought by many to adversely affect a child's health. Here are a few guidelines to follow when shopping for children's toys, educational supplies and clothes:

1. Avoid the plastic, noisy toys and look for toys made from natural materials such as wood, silk, wool, and beeswax. A search for "natural toys" will bring up a myriad of sites. Since these are usually small businesses, they know the production history of the toys and clothing they sell. Many sites, such as atoygarden.com, highlight toys that are made in the USA.
2. "Natural" has no legal meaning so be wary when searching for the perfect toy. Many large manufacturers are jumping on the "natural toy" bandwagon and selling wooden toys that are colored with toxic paint. Send an email to the owner of the site asking for details concerning the origin of production as well as any toxin tests that were conducted.
3. A search for "natural clothing" will also bring forth hundreds of sites. Hemp, silk, bamboo and organic cotton top the list of what makes up natural clothing. Reputable companies such as Patagonia have had a stake in the market for years, so you can get very high quality clothing that will last many children.
4. Be prepared to spend more money on a single item. This nation faces a clear choice, according to the Center for the Study of Commercialism: taking the path of 'continued commercialism and wasteful consumption' or building a society 'more concerned about personal development and satisfaction of common needs.'¹ Local is always better, so find a specialty store or better yet, a local artisan.
5. Remember that you are an artist and children love home made gifts.
6. Think outside the gift box. How many of us spend as much time with our children as we would like. Sign up for or create a class/trip/project that you will do with your child. You can present the brochure or other related materials as your gift.
7. Lastly and most importantly, start early.

Educate your child with your gift; let them know it is free trade, safe and green, and that Allah will love them for caring about others and the environment.

PS: For the toys you have at home, you can test toys for lead by using a home lead test kit. Although they may be limited in their use, a positive test result indicates a high likelihood that the product you're testing has some lead. Consumer Reports recommends the Lead Check and the Lead Inspector.

1. Consumers Union Education Series. (1995). Captive Kids: Commercial Pressures on Kids at School. Yonkers: Author.