

Gift Ideas to Get Kids Outdoors

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By Peter Zimowsky

Dear Santa:

A lot of kids will bomb me with snowballs for writing this letter, but it's really important.

You've got to go easy on the electronic games and gadgets, and no-imagination toys this holiday season. Promote more outdoorsy gifts.

Yup, this is serious. Kids are too plugged in these days. They need to be unplugged and introduced to the outdoors.

That's why when I was in an outdoors shop last week and spotted a pair of pint-sized snowshoes, I immediately bought them for my oldest grandson's gift.

There was no hesitation. (Hopefully, my son won't let him read this column, and the gift will remain a surprise.)

Santa, you've heard of Richard Louv, author of the book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder."

PLUGGED IN, STRESSED OUT

He says kids, who don't get outside, suffer from increased feelings of stress, have trouble paying attention and feel like they are not a part of the world around them. He calls the phenomena "nature deficit disorder."

He's right. You just don't see that many kids roaming around outdoors anymore.

I'm always surprised when I see a couple of kids riding bikes along the Greenbelt and carrying fishing rods. It's an oddity today, but it was very common in the past.

Everything is so structured with no-imagination toys to video games to sports.

One report said that the average child, 6 to 11 years old, spends an average of 30 hours per week looking at television or at a computer screen.

Kids spend 6.5 hours each day using electronic equipment in their free time, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation study.

So, I'm suggesting that you bring kids more nature- or outdoors-oriented gifts.

Playing outdoors promotes physical and mental health and creativity. They may not remember a TV show or a computer game, but they sure will remember the first mink they saw on a rock near the Boise River.

You're an outdoorsy guy riding around in a sled and tromping around in the snow. You understand.

OK, you can still bring a Wii or PlayStation, but maybe throw in a ringer to get the kids outdoors.

Santa, also tell parents that if they get an outdoors gift for their kids, it is a commitment to take their kids fishing, hiking or whatever.

OUTDOORSY PICKS

Here are some outdoorsy kids gifts:

BMX or mountain bike. It will have them out in the neighborhood or doing jumps in the vacant lot.

A new flashy bike helmet may spark more bike riding.

Bicycle accessories, like bells and baskets, can come in handy.

Inexpensive trekking poles come with a compass built in the handles. Kind of fun.

A good, quality compass will get kids interested in orienteering. Hey, it's north then east to Joey's house.

Kid-size fishing rods and fishing kits with a rod, reel and fishing box may spark a lifelong pursuit. There's even a Spider-Man fishing kit. A fly tying kit for older kids will spark an interest in bugs and stuff.

Sleds. It only takes a few inches of snow for sledding. Sleds and toboggans are fun and there's a lot of exercise going back up the hill. By the way, the Zipfy Freestyle Mini Luge is one hot sled. You'll fight the kids over it.

Kites. There's something about hiking around and chasing the wind to fly a kite. I think kite flying is a lost art.

Compact binoculars. This is one sure way of getting kids interested in wildlife watching. Some high-quality binoculars are made for youngsters.

Kid-size Camelbak packs are just the right size for pint-sized hikers and skiers.

Good, high-performance outdoor clothing for kids can be expensive, but it will make outdoor adventures more comfortable for them.

Junior-size backpacks, skis, snowshoes, sleeping bags and hiking shoes are available for kids.

Black Diamond even has a Wiz Kids head lamp.

Spark some bird watching. Instead of toys that buzz, light up and make a lot of noise, how about an assortment of wildlife puppets? I really love the snowy owl puppet I got one of my grandkids last year. It was a hit.

Move over Elmo, here comes a bald eagle puppet.

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