



IF ALL ELSE FAILS Be gracious and appreciate the generosity.



TRY THIS Get everyone to pitch in and contribute to a charity.



IF ALL ELSE FAILS Organize an office cookie exchange.



TRY THIS Make a date to do something special together.

Gift Control!

Put a stop to all that spending at Christmas. **BY ZIBA KASHEF**

IT'S EASY TO LOSE SIGHT of what matters most when you're rushing around buying an ever growing stack of presents. So you'd like to do things differently. But how to bring it up with family and friends without sounding like Scrooge? It's hard to challenge tradition, says etiquette consultant Melissa Leonard: "People don't want to be labeled the grinch of the holidays." Yet once the topic is raised, you may be surprised by how well it's received. Some families already put a limit on gifts, or match givers and recipients by drawing names. Need more inspiration? Consider these strategies:

Grandma and Grandpa pile on the presents.

TRY THIS Tell your parents or in-laws that you want your children to learn that Christmas or Hanukkah is about caring for each other, not just getting presents, suggests Ellie Kay, author of *Living Rich for Less*. Then ask for their help by limiting their generosity to one gift. If they want to do more, they can contribute to a college fund. "This way, they still get to indulge their desire to give," says Kay. And you put the focus on the kids without sounding critical. **IF ALL ELSE FAILS** and the grandparents go all out, be gracious. Enjoy their enthusiasm!

Your big family keeps getting bigger, with new spouses and offspring.

TRY THIS Leonard suggests enlisting the support of one close relative: "It takes some of the awkwardness off you." Then use a gathering like Thanksgiving to float the idea. "After dinner, when everyone is relaxed, casually bring up the subject," she says. Focus on the idea of trying something new—something you heard about—and restoring the holiday spirit. Avoid talk about saving money, since not all family members will be in the same boat.

Barbara Johnston of Felton, California, suggested to her parents and siblings that they skip presents for the adults and instead

contribute to agreed-upon charities. "Putting our money in the hands of people who needed it was liberating," she says.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS and your family can't bear to go cold turkey, suggest that everyone stop to watch a recipient open her present while the giver describes how he came up with it. The goal: to slow things down and encourage thoughtful giving. Or propose limiting adult gifts to fun stocking stuffers.

A coworker likes to play holiday elf and give presents to everyone.

TRY THIS Avoid saying, "Don't give me a gift," which may come across as rude. Instead, do what Marjan Perry of Valley Cottage, New York, does. "I give them a thank-you card or family-photo Christmas card," she says. Her coworkers get the message that while gifts are appreciated, they won't be reciprocated. That's fine with them, says Perry; perhaps, like many other people, they give just for the joy of it. **IF ALL ELSE FAILS** and you still feel awkward about not having something to give, take the lead and offer to organize an office recipe or cookie exchange.

A friend gives extravagant gifts that you feel obligated to match.

TRY THIS In lieu of presents, propose giving each other something even more precious: time. You might say, "This year, instead of exchanging gifts, why don't we make a date to do something special together?" **IF ALL ELSE FAILS** and your pal can't resist buying you a present, don't run out to get a make-up gift. It will be painfully obvious. Instead, follow up later with something more meaningful, like a handmade offering (see "Semi-Handmade Gifts," page 88).

Ziba Kashef, a freelance writer living in San Francisco, has asked her family to get gifts for only her little ones, Max and Maya.