CHRISTMAS 2022: ETERNAL FLAME

The gift that won’t keep on giving: ban coal as punishment at Christmas

Tamsin, Lilac, and Marigold Holland Brown argue that giving the black stuff to supposedly naughty children is damaging to their health and the environment

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Once linked to energy security and considered a welcome gift for keeping warm over the winter months, coal has since taken on a thought provoking association—encapsulated in the character who each Christmas rewards good children with gifts but leaves the miscreant ones with lumps of coal. 1 2 3 4 Coal gifted as punishment for supposedly naughty children is perpetuated on social media (see #coalforchristmas), and lumps of coal are widely available from major online retailers to encourage this practice. Our younger authors (LHB and MHB) point out that “[coal] is a fossil fuel and so giving children [coal means] the adults are being the naughty ones.” We need to “Be kind to the world.”

Why coal should be banned

Coal is bad for the environment and for health

Targets set by the UK 5 and ambitious global goals such as the fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty 6 depend on reducing the consumption of fossil fuel. Coal is a non-renewable fossil fuel 7 8; its extraction and combustion exacerbate the climate crisis and have been shown to have a negative impact on children’s health. 2 8 At school, children learn about sustainability and individual responsibility to protect the environment. It would be good for goodness’ sake if coal was left in the ground.

Children need care not coal

Giving children coal at Christmas as punishment will not improve so-called naughty behaviour, and it could have a negative impact on mental wellbeing. 9 The covid-19 pandemic, war, cost of living crisis, and climate emergency have all affected children’s mental health. 9 10 Time spent fostering positive friendships as well as connections between different generations improves self-worth, 9 and might combat anxiety. As Winnie the Pooh suggests, the festive season is a “togethery sort of holiday.” 10

Being naughty is good for the planet

Young people aged 10-24 years make up a quarter of the world’s population, so their collective voice is loud. 11 Swedish student Greta Thunberg, widely known as an environmental eco-activist, has drawn the attention of adults in power with her impassioned speeches about the climate emergency. Recognising that children “can’t save the world by playing by the rules.” 12 Thunberg inspired millions of children to go on school strike and attend climate marches—surely these children deserve to be on the nice, not naughty, list?

Alternative gifts for children

To ease anxiety over the climate crisis, children might be encouraged to create or source recycled or upcycled gifts, expand their dietary choices from major online retailers to encourage this practice. Other gifts that could support children’s wellbeing include novels with tales that inspire or reassure, and, possibly, for those who are ready to take on the responsibility, a small pet such as a stick insect. 14

Santa should phase out coal

The suggestion that children on the naughty list only deserve coal is outdated and potentially harmful to the environment and children’s health. Making or choosing gifts that connect children to people of all ages, nature, and animals can foster emotional, physical, and mental wellbeing over the festive season and could make a lifetime of difference.

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3 Philpot S. St Nicholas: naughty or nice? The History Vault. https://thehistoryvault.co.uk/st-nicholas-naughty-or-nice/
10 Philpot S. St Nicholas: naughty or nice? The History Vault. https://thehistoryvault.co.uk/st-nicholas-naughty-or-nice/


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