

Great Stocking Stuffer Ideas For The Youngsters

'Tis the season for presents under the tree and treats tucked into stockings hanging on the mantle. Who benefits more from the holiday season than youngsters? After all, it seems the winter months were just tailor made for them, with snow days, whimsical decorations, and lots and lots of gifts!

Today's kids seemingly have it all, which can make holiday shopping a bit of a challenge for those looking for something special to slip into a stocking.

Thinking outside of the box is one way to come up with some

clever gift ideas, especially ones that serve dual purposes. Think about these stocking-stuffers that are both fun and functional.

Treat of a toothbrush - Kids tend to tune out when Mom or Dad tells them to take care of a chore or handle daily grooming.

But with recognizable and enjoyable music as their partner, they'll want to tune into something that won't be a chore at all. Snow White "whistled while she worked" and now kids can hum along to "Old MacDonald" while keeping their teeth pearly white.

The colorful and quirky FireFly(R) Boppin' Barnyard Musical Timer Toothbrush from Dr. Fresh(R) plays that familiar childhood tune for the length of one minute -- the amount of time dentists say each row of teeth should be brushed for optimal health.

"Young children love music and animals, so we've combined them in a toothbrush that is sure to banish boredom, and to encourage good oral care from an early age," says Dr. Fresh. Soft, yet resilient, rounded bristles guard delicate young gums from irritation and microscopic cuts, and the toothbrush is ergonomically designed for a child's small hand. Learn more by visiting www.drfresh.com.

Colorful toy bins - Chances are that the children you know will receive dozens of new toys this holiday season.

And there's an even greater chance that they're joining an already mile-high pile of toys collected from birthday parties and doting grandparents. A toy sorter, toy chest, colorful bins, or stackable units can be the ideal complement to all of these toys.

While it actually won't fit in a stocking, it's still useful nonetheless. Kids will learn the lesson of keeping their toys in top-notch condition by putting them away neatly and in an organized manner. Parents will bestow on you words of great praise for helping to tidy

up the house.

Spectacular stationery and more - A trip to a stationery or office supply store can open doors to many wonderful stocking stuffer ideas.

Additionally, these finds can be put to good use by children for homework and in school. Stock up on colorful pens, pencils, sticky note pads, card stock and coordinating envelopes (for sending secret notes to friends), and stickers. These stores often also sell arts and crafts supplies that will fit right in with the theme. Kids can spend time expressing their creativity in between taking breaks from playing with their new holiday toys.



Holiday Entertaining On A Budget

With all those guests lining up for your holiday party, you quickly may feel like a gourmet chef at the most popular restaurant in town -- or worse, a short order cook holding off the lunch crowd.

You needn't spend tons of time in the kitchen to churn out a gourmet holiday party.

Nor must you empty your pockets to fill your guests' stomachs.

And you don't have to resort to chips and dip!

"Nut blends, cheeses, flavorful oils and chocolates are great items to have on-hand to easily and cost-effectively dress up holiday fare," says Josh Schroeter, a producer of healthy, all-natural snack foods.

Here are some tips for turning ho-hum holiday entertaining into hooray crowd pleasers:

* Make Finger Foods Sparkle:

Choose different types of nut blends and glazed nuts for when guests arrive.

Put each type in its own colorful bowl. Providing different flavors adds interest.

Pair the nuts with sparkling cider or champagne to get the festivities started.

* Liven Up Cheese Platters:

Assemble three kinds of cheeses on a platter:

one creamy (like brie or camembert), one aged (like manchego or English cheddar) and something unlike the other two (blue cheese, goat cheese, or sheep's milk cheese).

Instead of just plain fruit, sprinkle the platter with an exotic nut blend, like "Soledad Almonds," with apple, flax seeds, dates, balsamic vinegar and red pepper.

* Dress Up Your Sides:

Drizzle truffle oil over ordinary potato casserole and you've trans-

formed it into a gourmet dish.

Experiment with different additions to your meal using herbs, spices and oils that pack a punch without costing a bunch.

* Transform Winter Salads:

Even if you don't prepare your entire meal by hand, make a good impression with an easy, elegant salad.

Start with a bag of spinach, a drizzle of balsamic vinegar and sea salt.

Toss the leaves, then add olive oil until well coated.

Crumble blue cheese or goat cheese and add a handful of nuts and dried fruit, like "Valdosta Pecans" with black peppered pecans and cranberries.

* Make It A Brunch:

A holiday brunch may be perfect to fit your guests' busy schedules that already may be packed with nighttime parties.

Helpful Hints For Holiday Baking

Deck the halls. Shop the sales. Clean the house. Who has time for holiday baking?

What most don't realize, however, is that by doctoring up a box of cake mix with a few of your own special ingredients, you can quickly whip up a holiday treat that will fool anyone into believing it's 100 percent homemade.

"With all those holiday chores piling up on your to-do list, holiday baking can turn any of us into a grinch.

There are many tricks you can use to transform cake mixes into magical cakes that will fool your guests and even yourself," says Anne Byrn, author of the new book, "The Cake Mix Doctor Returns!"

And taking those few extra moments to bake something yourself

can be good for your family's soul.

"Now more than ever, with the stresses and demands of the outside world, the home and the kitchen are a refuge.

Baking and sharing good food with those we love strengthens and renews us," she says.

Here are some ideas from Byrn's new book to help you turn ordinary cake mixes into extraordinary results:

* Top chocolate cakes with crushed peppermints for that candy cane zing.

* Turn a plain vanilla or yellow cake mix into a spice cake by adding your own cinnamon (one teaspoon), allspice (half teaspoon) and ground nutmeg (quarter teaspoon).

* Add eggnog and fruit pre-

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