

Teacher Gifts - What's Hot and What's Not

by: June Allan Corrigan

Stumped about what to get your child's teacher? When pressed, teachers will 'fess up to likes and dislikes in the gift department.

'Tis the season for gifting and maybe re-gifting, but what if your recipient secretly wishes you hadn't bothered at all? That's the predicament of teachers around holiday time. They are often inundated with gifts and most generally appreciate the gesture but how many bottles of scented hand cream does one person really need?

As a parent, you want to choose a gift that reflects your gratitude to the person who spends their day nurturing and educating your child, but it's so easy to trip up. What should you get? How much should you spend? Don't you wish you could just ask them? Here are the results of an informal poll of area teachers that did just that.

Without a doubt, gift cards get the biggest thumbs up. "Seriously, gift cards are the most cherished teacher gifts...they just are," said a first-grade teacher in Alexandria, VA. Restaurants, department stores, book stores, I-tunes - they all issue them in various denominations and there's often a section in your grocery store that stocks them so you don't even have to go out of your way to get one.

Thumbs down: "'World's Best Teacher' mugs - I must have 25 of them!" groaned a first-grade teacher in Rockville, MD. "I drink from one, then I fill the rest with pens in my den, toothbrushes in my bathroom, plastic utensils in my kitchen, pencils in my classroom and I STILL have some left over!" General consensus from teachers in all districts - No more mugs, EVER.

Gift certificates to day spas, or for a manicure or pedicure gets a big thumbs up. "I use them to pamper myself over winter break," said a Bethesda third-grade teacher.

Thumbs down: Tote bags - often emblazoned as well with that ubiquitous catch phrase "World's Best Teacher"! "All the teachers I know have enough," stated a second grade teacher from Potomac, MD, "so they're next to impossible to re-gift." Best conclusion to draw here: Forget about anything imprinted with those three words!

Several teachers gave thumbs up to a nice bottle of wine, although a male teacher in Alexandria admitted to feeling a little uncomfortable when presented with a fifth of gin from a fresh-faced fourth grader.

Thumbs down: "Never buy clothing for your child's teacher, especially T-shirts with the child's photograph screened onto the front. It's just weird and will never be worn," said the first grade Alexandria teacher. "Scarves, please, no more scarves!" pleaded a second grade teacher from Silver Spring, MD. Ditto for ties.

Teachers were divided on the subject of food gifts. A couple of male teachers owned up to really enjoying plates of cookies & other holiday treats. However, one female teacher voiced reservations about home baked goods "Did the kindergartner lick the spoon while she was helping mommy bake?" Fruit, in place of overly calorie laden fare, won a unanimous thumbs up - think Fruit of the Month club or a small gift basket.

Thumbs down: : Perfumes, hand cream, bath salts, after shave lotions - "These items are just too personal and the scent always ends up being one I would never choose for myself," said a third grade teacher in Clarksburg, MD.

If students and/or parents know a teacher's hobbies, then a gift choice along those lines is often met with an enthusiastic thumbs up. It might be a fun little kitchen gadget for the gourmet cook or a destination book for a travel buff. Grill your kids a little if you need to find out more about their teacher.

Thumbs down: Tiptoe around gift cards or certificates from hot-button corporations such as Starbucks or Walmart. Unless you actually see a teacher with a Starbucks cup in hand or toting a shopping bag from Walmart, don't make assumptions that everyone's a big fan (or even a coffee drinker).

Many of the teachers polled said that often the most meaningful gift was a letter of thanks or recognition from parents or a child for a job well done. "It's such a boost to receive validation," said a Rockville, MD first grade teacher.

The bottom line is teachers really don't expect gifts, but if you are going to give one, spend your money wisely. Give a gift you know they'll enjoy and be glad to receive. Consider going in with other families on gift cards or certificates. Even small contributions can add up fast. Combine it with a thoughtful card or letter and you'll have a winner!

June Allan Corrigan is a freelance writer and mother of two school age children. She is no stranger to the perils of selecting the perfect teacher gift.