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Evidently nothing is as simple as it used to be — even buying a child a Christmas outfit.

Dr. Joyce Brothers, that guru of American pop psychology, has been doing consulting work for Garanimals, the children's wear manufacturer, and has come up with some reasons why new clothes are important for the young set.

"Tradition gives children roots and feeling of stability, and if we treat Christmas just like any other day, it chips away at those roots," Brothers said.

For parents racing madly from store to store trying to find just the right present to light up little Johnny or Janie on Christmas morning, this might sound like less than news.

But Brothers does have some specific suggestions.

"ENCOURAGING a child to 'dress up' is part of the tradition of the holidays. It can be the traditional red velvet dress, or simply a new outfit with special styling touches which can also be worn for school or play."

And there are social significances, too.

"Children need to learn appropriate dress for different occasions," Brothers said. "The clothing we wear to church or synagogue is not the clothing we wear to a baseball game or a picnic."

She said she's frequently asked

where parents should draw the line on dress codes.

"If a daughter chooses a garment to wear to a Christmas dance — one which the mother feels is inappropriate — whose taste should triumph, hers or mom's?" she asked.

BROTHERS thinks it's a good time to allow children to practice decision-making.

"If they do make a mistake, it's relatively harmless," she said.

And should children be expected to be on their best behavior at Christmas, no matter what they're wearing?

"No," said Brothers. She said surveys show most families can stand about 72 hours of "peaceful togetherness" before the fights start.

"A GOOD way to cut down on arguments at Christmas is for each family member to take time out to be alone," Brothers said. (That used to mean being told to go to your room and stay there until you could act like a human being.)

"However," she continued, "family togetherness is part of the family tradition. Children need to feel that they are an important part of the celebration."

"After all, all the commercialism has created expectations that often cannot be met. That, too, is a standard part of the Christmas season."

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