



# FAMILY CELEBRATIONS

*A More Fun, Less Stuff Guide  
to Life's Joyful Events*

**NewDream**  
MORE OF WHAT MATTERS

# Introduction

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**Human connection.** That's what holiday parties, baby showers, birthday parties—any type of celebration, really—boils down to. Think about weddings: it would be a lot less work and cost if a wedding consisted solely of a ceremony. No need to provide a meal or coordinate entertainment. No need to think about seating arrangements or table decorations. Yet despite the hassle, most of us still choose to honor the start of a marriage with a celebration.

**Why? *Because we are hardwired for connection.***<sup>1</sup>

Connection is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. And connection is what we crave when we celebrate our momentous occasions. We want friends and family close by when we get married or have a baby or graduate from college. We want them to share in our joy and support us with their presence.

Yet frequently, the desire for human connection isn't what comes to mind when we think of the typical celebration. From baby showers to sweet sixteens to bar mitzvahs, extravagant events seem to have become a cultural expectation. Just go to Pinterest and check out the most popular celebration "pins": elaborate centerpieces, over-the-top favors, and expensive entertainment ideas.

From a [camping-themed first birthday party with a three-tiered cake](#) to a [boho baby shower with a teepee](#), pervasive messaging reinforces the myth that a celebration must be showy and expensive in order to be beautiful and memorable. Not surprisingly, the average cost of hosting celebrations in the United States is rising steadily.<sup>2</sup>



# How to Use This Guide

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This celebration guide is designed to serve as a practical resource regardless of whether you're planning a holiday gathering, baby shower, birthday party, community potluck, graduation picnic, or backyard barbecue.

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The main aims of this guide are to:  
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- 1** Provide options for those who want to **prioritize connection over consumption** and to plan special celebrations that reflect their lifestyle, promote their values, and enhance their lives.
- 2** Provide a blueprint for those who view their celebration not as an opportunity to impress, but as an opportunity to **strengthen relationships with friends and family** and to encourage a refreshing new way to celebrate.
- 3** Offer inspiration and tips for those who want to host more **environmentally friendly** celebrations, as well as those who are looking to **reduce costs and simplify**.
- 4** Inspire those who want to **joyfully connect with their neighbors and community** without all the cost and unnecessary "stuff."



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## YEAR-END HOLIDAYS

*"If you want your children to turn out well,  
spend twice as much time with them,  
and half as much money."*

— Abigail Van Buren

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hannukkah, Kwanzaa, Winter Solstice, and more, all in a 30-day period. The year-end holidays—meant to be times of peace, reflection, and celebration—too often exhaust us rather than uplift us. Rather than bringing joy and meaning, the “celebrations” feel more like an onslaught of shopping, spending, and frenzied preparations. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

# Our Favorite Holiday Tips

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Whatever you celebrate, you can design a holiday season focused on connection over consumption. It's a matter of prioritizing more of what matters—things like sharing, laughter, and rest—and less of what doesn't—stress, waste, and debt. Below are our favorite simplifying tips to help you design a restful, yet joyful, holiday season.

1

## Set Your Intentions

Take a few minutes to think through what you want out of the holidays this year. Does your usual celebration focus on the aspects you feel are most important? Are there traditions you've let lapse that you would love to bring back? What parts of the celebration would be easiest to change, so you can spend time on more of what matters?

With your family, write down the top five holiday events, activities, or traditions that are most meaningful to you. You can then use this list as the filter through which you make decisions about which traditions to keep and which to lose. (For example, if nobody in your family cares about the holiday lights in the yard, don't bother putting them up.) If you find this exercise challenging, take our ["Big Picture" Quiz](#) to help determine what matters most to your family and what doesn't.

2

## Leave a Margin

Part of what makes the holidays so challenging is that there's so much fun to be had! Treasured holiday movies, get togethers with loved ones, meaningful service projects, adorable holiday crafts, the list goes on. But you have to leave yourself breathing room if you want a sane holiday season that doesn't make you feel like you're spinning out of control.

As the season starts, don't cram your calendar. Leave plenty of white space so that you can accept that last-minute invitation for hot chocolate with your neighbors. This is where your list of priorities can become a life saver. If an event isn't a family favorite, think carefully about whether it should make it onto your calendar. Try to envision how you and your family will feel on the day of the event—would you be excited or resentful about going?



For additional resources, check out our [Simplify the Holidays](#) campaign.

## 3

### Go Paperless

This year, skip the holiday cards. No more searching for the perfect photo. No more licking envelopes and writing out hundreds of addresses. Think of all the time and money you'll save! With social media connecting us with loved ones far away, the holiday card doesn't seem as necessary to keep relationships alive.

If you want, you can still send an email to folks on your list, explaining that you're foregoing cards this year but that you hope their holiday is joyful and bright. You can post a similar message on social media. There are also plenty of beautiful paperless options these days. Or, you can host a [holiday card swap party](#) with friends and make upcycled cards while having a merry time.

## 4

### Use What You Have

When it comes to decor, adopt the "less is more" attitude. That way, your favorites really shine and you don't spend countless hours shopping for, putting up, and taking down decorations. Commit to not buying any new decorations this year—instead, use what you have or bring the outdoors in. Check out our [Simplify the Holidays Pinterest board](#) for simple ways you can use what you have to deck out your home for the holidays.

## 5

### Cancel "The Show"

Author Brené Brown [recounts](#) a terrible Christmas memory that she uses to help her focus on more of what matters during the holidays. She was sitting in her kitchen, addressing 225 Christmas cards, while her son was crying in his room because she wouldn't read him "the reindeer book" until she finished the cards. Her daughter was sulking in the living room because it was too late to start a *Polar Express* family movie night.

Eventually, Brené exploded and yelled: "I HAVE to finish these cards!... Everyone wants to send them, but I'm the one who has to make it happen!" When the house got very quiet, she remembers telling herself: "Oh, well. The show must go on."

After that incident, Brené began to realize that, when our lives become pageants, we become actors. And when we become actors, we sacrifice authenticity. Without authenticity, we can't cultivate love and connection. Without love and connection, we have nothing.

This year, cancel the show. That doesn't mean cancel the holiday. It just means thinking about the various roles you play. Which ones are authentic and bring you joy? If you don't enjoy hosting an extravagant meal and only do it because your extended family expects you to play the part, why not just cancel the show and invite them for dessert instead? Or host a hot chocolate and movie party. Maybe just invite your loved ones to meet you at an ice skating rink. Or organize a group service project. Or, don't host a gathering at all. Repeat to yourself: The show does not have to go on.





## 6

### **Our Top Tip: Skip the Stores This Year!**

For many of us, overspending is the biggest source of holiday stress. Even when money isn't a concern, holiday shopping can still be stressful. Meanwhile, all of the time spent shopping replaces time you could be using to connect with loved ones. This year, commit to skipping the stores—brick-and-mortar as well as online.

Before you start panicking, keep in mind that we're not asking you to eliminate gift giving altogether. While a no-gift policy may work for some families, most of us feel uncomfortable showing up empty-handed to celebrations.

Why do we feel such pressure to gift? Is it simply our culture that makes us feel obligated? In [The 5 Love Languages](#), Gary Chapman views it differently. After researching love and marriage in cultures around the world, he finds that, in every culture he studied, gift giving seems to be a "fundamental expression of love that transcends cultural barriers."

However, the idea that *we can only express our love by giving expensive material items* almost certainly reflects cultural pressure. To free yourself from this notion, we recommend thinking outside the box and giving in a manner that prioritizes "more fun and less stuff."

This year, emphasize connecting with your loved ones over buying more stuff. Consider, for example, giving gifts of time and skill. Do you play guitar? Offer a few beginner lessons to your child or spouse. Love to entertain? Help a party-shy friend plan a fun event. Can't think of any "special skills"? You can always dog walk, shovel snow, or babysit.

You can also consider gifts of experience. From museum memberships to concert tickets to restaurant gift cards, you can give your loved ones a wonderful memory. Even better, make it a date and join them!

For hundreds of meaningful gift ideas, download our alternative gift catalog, the [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#). You'll find wonderful ideas for everyone on your list. And for those of you who want to give meaningful gifts but don't want to show up empty-handed, print out our fully customizable [coupon book](#), where you can apply endless creativity in your gifting.



**Get ideas for gifts of quality time and experience in our [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#).**

# Want to Add a Fun Twist to Gift Giving?

## Create a “GiveList” on SoKind Registry



If you're unsure about what kind of “meaningful gift” your loved one would enjoy, why not add a fun twist and let them actually choose?

Through New Dream's [SoKind registry](#), you can create a GiveList of all the gifts you're happy to offer this year. A GiveList flips a traditional registry on its head and allows you to compile a list of unique and creative gifts that you're willing to give to others.

Is there a local artist you'd like to support? Put one of her pieces on your GiveList. Are there organizations that you'd love to help this year?

Add them to your GiveList and, if a loved one chooses that gift, make a donation in his name. Want a mountain biking buddy? Who knows— maybe Grandma will surprise you.

Once you've compiled a list of gifts, simply share the link to your GiveList, and your loved ones can choose the gifts that they'd most like to receive. Need inspiration? Check out this [sample GiveList](#) for ideas.



It's never too early to learn the importance of giving! Our [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#) has an entire section devoted to ideas for gifts that kids can give to others.

# How to Ask for the Gifts You Really Want This Holiday Season

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For many of us, gift giving isn't nearly as big a challenge as the gifts we receive. Is it really good for our kids to receive so much every year? What about all the waste created in producing the toys and trinkets—many of them made from cheap, nondurable plastic. And the clutter... don't even get us started on that!

How can we communicate these concerns to loved ones while still demonstrating that we appreciate the time and effort that goes into gift giving? One approach is to model the kind of gift giving you would appreciate: if you don't want your kids to receive junky toys, don't give junky toys!

If you want to be more direct in asking for what you want, you can create a detailed holiday wish list through [SoKind registry](#). Would you prefer babysitting hours to the latest kitchen gadget? Put it on your list. Have too many sweaters? Ask people to spend a day with you volunteering at your favorite charity instead. SoKind lets you register for anything from homemade gifts and secondhand goods to charitable donations and experiences—as well as more traditional gifts.

**If you feel uneasy about being the first to push out a holiday wish list to your circle, try proposing it like this:**

*"This year, I really want to make sure that I'm giving gifts you want. I don't just want to add clutter! I heard about this service called [SoKind](#) that lets families make holiday wish lists. You can think creatively and register for gifts that you can't get in a store. Here's a [sample wish list](#) to look at. Wouldn't it be fun if our families each created one this year?"*

**For a GiveList, maybe try something like this:**

*"This year, I really want to make sure that I'm giving gifts you really want. I don't just want to add clutter! I heard about this service called [SoKind](#) that lets families make holiday GiveLists and wish lists. I'd love to do something like this. Here is a [sample GiveList](#) to look at. Wouldn't it be fun if our families created these this year?"*

Or, create just the GiveList and see if anybody asks about a wish list. If they do, be sure to have one ready to share!

## Amy's Story



Staring into the closet where I stored the Christmas gifts I had bought for my young daughter, I felt overwhelmed and even a bit disgusted. I looked at the mountain of gifts and considered her playroom, already bursting with playthings. Could this excess be good for her?

What relationship between love and material possessions was I modeling for my child? With so many toys, would any particular one ever become cherished and [Velveteen Rabbit-real](#) for her? Could I impart the importance of creativity, frugality, and experiences over material goods with this heap of stuff?

My discomfort led me to some favorite resources, including [New Dream's website](#). I began to ponder the messages being sent by the gifts my family gives. In years past, we had tried to avoid the mall or big-box retailers and to focus instead on free trade, artisan, and handmade goods. But ultimately, these were still material goods. Most importantly, they didn't provide the gift most of us want the most: love and time.

I realized I could simply give my time and talents to family and friends. Our [holiday coupon book](#) gift was born:

- One of my friends had been wanting to learn how to can her own food, and, fortunately, I'm an avid canner. To her, I **gifted lessons in water bath canning**. When she redeemed the coupon, we made jams, marmalade, and other fruit preserves together.
- Another friend frequently took weekend trips and left her dog under the care of a critter sitter. I **gifted my pet care services to her family**, knowing that it would not only help her save money, but also provide the comfort of no longer having a stranger come to her house.



- My gift list also included a fellow homeschooling mother, who was busy with many young children and often overwhelmed with her domestic tasks. I **gifted her "an extra set of hands,"** meaning "call me at a moment when you are struggling and I can do whatever you need: watch the children, help with chores, pick something up at the store, etc."

The [coupon book](#) was the ideal solution for finding more nourishing gifts for my daughter. Her first book had 10 coupons: 5 each from me and my husband. Among her gifts: 2 coupons for "screen-free parents" weekend, 1 restaurant dinner of your choice, 1 s'mores making & ghost story reading bonfire, 1 hike at a state park of her choosing, and 1 geocaching Saturday afternoon at a destination of her choice. These gifts didn't just provide time and experiences but also the power of choice, which I know my daughter enjoys.

.....  
*"Toys don't make an occasion special  
—the people and experiences do."*  
.....

As for the closetful of new toys, I donated over half, knowing that other children would appreciate them. The others I used as an emergency stash for birthday parties. With her stack of new books, a beautiful horse stable made by Daddy, and the [coupon book](#), my daughter was more than content at Christmas, proving to me just how misguided I had been to have acquired so many toys.

—Amy