



HOLIDAY Traditions



Host a Cookie Exchange

The holiday season comes with a lot of activities, decorating and travel — leaving almost everyone wishing for more time in which to do it all. Christmas cookie exchange parties are great because in one swoop, they allow us to spend time with friends and family, and simplify our holiday baking.

Follow this guide, and you will be hosting a festive get-together that will leave people envious that it wasn't their idea.

SET A DATE

The first step to hosting an unforgettable Christmas cookie exchange is creating a guest list and setting a date and time.

Picking a date can be tricky. You will want to pick a date close enough to the holidays that the cookies will last for a while and people are already thinking of baking, but not so close to Christmas that you infringe on people's "last-minute" time to finish projects and shop-

ping.

SEND THE INVITATIONS

The idea behind the Christmas cookie exchange is that each person invited brings one kind of cookie to share. Be sure this is clear in your invitation, and be sure to give your guests a cookie count so they know how many to bring.

If you have any other rules you wish to set for the exchange, they should be communicated in the invitation. For example, you might wish to make clear that the cookies should be homemade and seasonally appropriate.

PROVIDE OTHER REFRESHMENTS

While a good amount of sampling

will be done before the actual exchange, you will want to provide more than cookies. Think appetizers and finger foods.

Serve an array of beverages, such as coffee, iced teas or spiked punch. And since it is a cookie party, you would be remiss not to offer milk.

DON'T FORGET THE KIDDOS

If you are going to have kids at the party, it might be nice to plan a special activity for them, such as a cookie decorating station. Bake extra batches of blank sugar cookies and let the children decorate them however they want.

You also might think about hiring a

trusted babysitter for a few hours during the party to oversee the decorating — leaving you and parents of younger children to have fun socializing at the party.

ARRANGE A PACKING STATION

Don't forget the whole point of the party is to exchange cookies. It is likely none of your guests will try every cookie during the party, so you need to provide packing materials so they can take a variety home with them.

Lay out boxes, sandwich bags and sticker labels for people to pack up their goodies. Offer colorful ribbon or cellophane for an added special touch.

Holiday Movie Lineup

The holiday season brings many traditions — holiday baking, decorating and parties, to name a few. But when the day is done, continue the holiday cheer by cozying up on the couch with a great holiday movie.

Alone or surrounded by your favorite people, here is a sampling of holiday movies you should watch at least once.

ANIMATED

A Charlie Brown Christmas (1965): Follow the whole Peanuts gang as Charlie Brown tries to understand what Christmas is all about.

The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993): A Tim Burton holiday masterpiece follows Jack, a skeleton bored with his own holiday of Halloween, who tries on Christmas for size.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas (two versions) (1966 and 2000): Incomparable and fantastic in their own way, both will undoubtedly make your heart grow three sizes.

The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992): If you ever doubted that Kermit the Frog and Charles Dickens could create magic, this film is here to prove otherwise. Kermit as Bob Cratchit and Michael Cain as Ebenezer Scrooge make this film a casting win.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer (1964): This stop-motion animation is a classic. It's time to introduce a whole new generation to Rudolf and his misfit friends.

The Polar Express (2004): This recent classic features breathtaking animation



and Tom Hanks as the voice over for several characters, following a young boy on a train ride to the North Pole. Wonders never cease for those who believe.

FEEL-GOOD FAMILY MOVIES

A Christmas Story (1983): We all had that one toy we wanted desperately as a child. For Ralphie Parker, this was the Red Ryder carbine action 200-shot range model air rifle with a compass in the stock and “this thing which tells time.”

National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation (1989): Clark Griswold has big holiday plans. But like most plans, things don't go as expected. In other words, disaster, Griswold style.

Home Alone (1990): Left at home at Christmas by mistake, Kevin McCallister is left to fight off two reckless burglars with creative pranks only a child could imagine.

Elf (2003): Buddy the Elf is lovable and full of so much Christmas cheer, he will remind any Scrooge of the true meaning of Christmas.

The Family Man (2000): One Christmas night, Jack wakes to find his lavish bachelor lifestyle replaced with the life he would have had, had he stayed with his college sweetheart. Think a modern twist of the “what if” plot of “It's a Wonderful Life.”

The Santa Clause (1994): Tim Allen provides a whole new (comedic) possibility to the origins of Santa Clause.

Prancer (1989): A farm girl finds a wounded reindeer she believes is Prancer, hoping to nurse it back to health in time for Christmas.

CLASSICS

It's a Wonderful Life (1946): George Bailey has a wonderful life, and he will leave you feeling like yours is pretty great, too.

White Christmas (1954): Starring Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney, two of the greats remembered year after year for their renditions of Christmas classics.

Miracle on 34th Street (1947 and 1994): It's OK to believe in Santa — after all, faith is what Christmas is all about.

The Perfect Christmas Tree

The “perfect tree” means different things to different people, and the merits of a fir versus a pine, tall and slim versus short and wide, are argued at length each year.

But one aspect of Christmas trees on which people tend to hold a strong stance is material: Are you a “real” Christmas tree believer? Or do you prefer an artificial tree?

To help you decide (or sway you in a different direction), consider the following pros and cons of both Christmas tree types.

ARTIFICIAL TREES

Benefits

Convenience: Each year, this tree is simply taken out of storage and assembled. Its shape is always “perfect,” it won’t molt its needles, and it never needs to be watered.

Cost: While the initial investment might be pricey depending on the size and style you choose (pre-lit, dusted with fake snow, or ornamented with pine cones, for example), it is a cost that is only incurred once, rather than every year.

Drawbacks

Non-biodegradable: This means when you throw it out, it will be in the landfill forever.

Sizable carbon footprint: More than 85 percent of artificial trees are made in China and shipped to the United States.

Fire hazard: They not only burn easily but act as an accelerant — causing much more damage than if a live tree were to burn in your home.



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LIVE TREES

Benefits

Made in the U.S.A.: According to the USDA, almost all of the 25 to 30 million real Christmas trees sold in the U.S. every year are

grown in the U.S.

Eco-friendly: Live trees are recyclable.

Smell great: A natural deodorizer, there is really nothing like the scent of fresh pine or balsam fir.

Drawbacks

Cost: Your cost will depend on the size of tree you choose as well as where you live, but most trees run anywhere from \$20 to \$200 — a recurring cost as one tree will

only last the current holiday season.

High maintenance: Needles will begin to litter the floor almost immediately, and live trees must be watered heavily every day.



Caring at Christmas

Don't forget about our less-fortunate animal friends during the holidays. Offering your help this holiday season is a great tradition to start. According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters each year.

While it is estimated that 3.2 million shelter animals are adopted every year and another 700,000 sheltered strays are returned to their owners, this still leaves many animals in need of care — especially during the holidays.

NEEDED DONATIONS

- Pet food and treats

- Puppy and Kitten formula and nursing bottles
- Collars and leashes
- Towels and blankets
- Grooming supplies
- Kitty litter
- Newspapers
- Paper towels
- Cleaning supplies
- Crates and carriers
- Food bowls

- And don't forget something to play with.

DONATING YOUR TIME AND TALENTS

If you would like to do more than drop items off, shelters can always use extra hands. Walking animals, cleaning kennels and doing laundry are all never-ending tasks with

which shelter staff constantly struggle to keep up.

Even volunteering one Saturday could make a big impact on your local shelter. If you are looking to volunteer more long term, consider volunteering to transport animals — a duty needed in order to get animals to vet appointments and adoption

fairs.

And don't forget any talents or skills you could donate. For example, if you have decent photography skills, offer to update the animal photos on the shelter's website. Research shows that the way shelter animals are photographed directly impact how many inquiries they receive.

Elf on the Shelf

Elf on the Shelf has transformed into a 21st Century Christmas tradition with “The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition” — a children’s picture book written by Carol Aebersold and Chanda Bell, and illustrated by Coe Steinwart.

While forms of this tradition have existed around the world for centuries, this Christmas-themed story of an elf who keeps Santa informed about who is naughty and who is nice exponentially increased the popularity of the tradition.

INTRODUCING ELF

While Elf starts off a wonderful Christmas season with a bang, be sure not to introduce him too soon. You don’t want him to run out of ideas or let time steal the novelty out of the activity for your children.

It is customary for Elf to appear no earlier than December 1. Many people also see their Elf for the first time the night the family decorates the Christmas tree.

STICK TO SIMPLE SHENANIGANS

Elf should be able to get into her position easily, and she shouldn’t raise the expectation too much, too soon.

If she gets up to very complicated hijinks early in the season, she might run out of mischievous and creative ideas before Christmas. Pinterest is a great tool for

finding out what kind of shenanigans other families’ Elves have gotten into.

AN ELF IS AN ELF IS AN ELF

While the commercialism of Elf is deep-seated, you don’t have to have the advertised Elf. Anything can be an Elf. Any small figurine or stuffed animal will do, with a dose of Christmas magic, of course.

SET A REMINDER

This is especially important if you’ve set the expectation that Elf is up to something different each night.

Don’t let Elf forget to adventure around the house, so you won’t have disappointed or confused little faces in the morning.

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Remember, there is no official rule book. Maybe your elf appears in a different spot each morning, or maybe he only appears when the kids have been good.

Maybe he brings treats or small notes with him. There is no right or wrong way to start an Elf tradition. He is just there to add another dash of magic to the season.



A Season of Giving

The holiday season is known as one of giving. While it is good to make a conscious effort to give back throughout the year, the holidays are a time when we especially like to think of others.

Here are just a few ways you can spread the act of kindness this holiday.

Shop for other families in need. Take your children along. Let them be an active participant in choosing the gifts and, depending on which organization you are working with, wrapping the gift. This helps teach children that Christmas is about the giving, not receiving, of gifts.

Give what you already have. Have your children choose a few of their own toys to donate. This is a nice way to think of others and make room for the new items they are sure to receive. This can also teach your children to be grateful for what they have and nurture a desire to share with others.

Surprise those who serve your community. Take your holiday family baking tradition one step further and bundle up nice little care packages. Drop these goodies off to groups of people who serve the community — firefighters, ambulance drivers and nurses, for example. You can always give to as many every year as you can, or pick a different group to share the holiday cheer with each year.

Carol to those with infrequent visitors. Caroling is a great way to spread Christmas cheer to those who might not have anyone to share the holiday with. The word “carol” actually means a dance or a



song of joy and praise. A festive holiday tune can brighten anyone's spirits.

Start a sibling secret Santa.

Have each family member draw names from a hat and gift something extra special for that person. You can even

enforce rules to make the activity both more distinct and fair, such as requiring that all gifts be handmade. Exchange these

presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning to distinguish the gifts even more.

Keepsake Traditions

All Christmas traditions are magical, but keepsake traditions are just a bit more special. They act as a type of scrapbook or album of moments for us to remember and share with others.

Create memories for the years to come by starting one of these traditions this holiday season.

CREATE KEEPSAKE ORNAMENTS

Make ornaments as a family every year. You can go to most local craft stores and purchase clear glass bulbs that you can either fill (with glitter for snow) or paint the outside of. If you're feeling extra crafty, try your hand at salt dough ornaments.

GIFT AN ORNAMENT

Each Christmas, gift an ornament to each of your children. Think about the year, and consider what each child has accomplished, overcome or experienced and gift an ornament that conveys a particular memory, or even the general feeling that year evoked. By the time they are grown, each child will have a full set of ornaments to take with them to start their own family tree.

WRITE CHRISTMAS LETTERS

Each year, have a member of the family, or several family members, record a bit of family

history. This can be anything from highlights to challenges the family experienced throughout the year. Place them in a special Christmas box. Make it extra special by having the kids decorate the box. Over the years, you can pull out the letters and share them.

BUILD TREE SKIRT MEMORIES

Purchase a plain tree skirt. Any color will do, as long as it is a solid color. Then, every year, trace your child's hand on the skirt and write their name inside the outline. You can begin a new ring for each child or trace their hands side by side. It will be fun later to look back at the skirt and the growing little hands.

PRESENT CHRISTMAS PAJAMAS

A wonderful Christmas tradition is gifting Christmas pajamas. These can be wrapped and put under the tree to be opened on Christmas Eve. This way, everyone can wake up Christmas morning wearing their holiday jammies.

