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Holiday Time Tips: Meaningful Ways to Streamline and Celebrate Gleaned from America's Past

When we recall pleasant memories of holidays past, we may be bringing up rosy memories because we were children and weren't responsible for buying and wrapping [gifts](#) and decorating and cooking. Our mothers and grandmothers lacked many of the household conveniences we enjoy, and while there may have been a shared pleasure to a family going out to select and chop down a Christmas tree, or an extended family getting together to prepare a big holiday meal, they almost certainly felt over-extended and ran into frustrations with all the extra work surrounding the holidays, just as we do today.

The true secret to holidays then and now is to simplify. Be careful about what activities actually make it onto the [family](#) calendar, and be very careful about what commitments you make at this time of year.

Plan Ahead:

- In November, sit down with the family and let everyone express what is most important to them for the holiday. A good way to elicit this information is asking each person to complete the following sentence: "It wouldn't be our family's holiday if we didn't _____." If your eight-year-old doesn't even remember the skating expedition you took him on last December, that's a good activity to cut from the list.
- Write on the family calendar any school concerts or performances. Also, consider how you want to help out at school. Baking? Donating juice? Doing a project? By letting your child know now, you have a better chance that the tasks assigned fit the time you have to devote to them.
- As soon as any adult activities are scheduled, book your favorite sitter immediately.

Simplifying Gifts in This Day of "Too Much"

American families of the past limited the number of gifts they gave simply because they didn't rely on plastic. Without credit cards, family members bought only what they had cash for. Parents know from year's past that if a child receives 10 different gifts, only one or two of them have "staying power." (And think how much tidier your house would be if you could limit the number of toys in the house!)

- In preparation for the new toys your children will receive, ask them to sort through their old ones. Broken toys and incomplete games should be thrown out; "gently used" items should be donated. Some families pass on to cousins items such as tricycles, bikes and dollhouses so they are always being used by someone.
- Encourage your children to give you and any other relatives a "gift of themselves." A beautiful drawing by your four-year-old or a list of "Ten Favorite Things I Like to Do With Mommy (or Daddy)" will bring everyone more pleasure than any purchased item could possibly bring.

Out and About

- For holiday outings, a large tote is indispensable. Use it to hold coats (roll them) and to store umbrellas, hats and mittens. Tuck the tote under your seat and enjoy the performance without worrying that your little one may have kicked the umbrella out into the aisle.

Ending in Style

- Enlist extra hands in putting away. If children are old enough to decorate, they are old enough to put away.
- Note what worked and what didn't work this year. (How big was the tree? When did you feel over-scheduled?) Notes that you can refer to next December will make all the difference.

Kate Kelly is author of **Election Day: An American Holiday, an American History** as well as a six-volume history of medicine. On her website, [America Comes Alive](#), she chronicles stories of America's past that are relevant to life today. Visit [America Comes Alive](#) and its [Facebook](#) page to learn more about America's past – and how it influences today's America.

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