



Make Theirs Magic Christmas Calendar

31 ways to create Christmas
family magic



Christmas takes one of the great but everyday pleasures of life – spending quality time with the ones we love – and wraps it in tradition and magic.

A good Christmas can provide the stability we crave now more than ever by allowing us quality time to spend with family and friends and the opportunity to share food, gifts and goodwill with those around us.

Yet, it is the everyday that nourishes us. It represents the partner we've chosen, the family that loves and supports us and the friends who understand and are always there... something that's become much clearer in the past couple of years, when things have been so hard for so many of us.

This Christmas calendar helps celebrate festive family traditions and prioritise time with those you love. Spending time together can create comfort and strength; something that shines through in the stories about family traditions we share here. I hope they warm your heart as they did mine upon reading them.

From our work, however, we know that not everybody has the same opportunity to see Christmas positively - whether that's because of increased family pressures, difficult memories or the fallout from a very challenging year.

We believe that every family deserves a happy Christmas. That's why our calendar includes ways to give back to your local community and find joy and satisfaction as a family in making new traditions rooted in kindness and understanding.

Together we can make Christmas more magical for us all.
With festive best wishes

David Holmes

David Holmes CBE
CEO, Family Action



Traditions give us a shared identity and strengthen our bond as a family unit.

Where to start

Use our 'Makes Theirs Magic' Christmas Calendar to prioritise family time together over the festive season by creating a magical schedule of old and new traditions.

Our calendar is a little different in that it covers all 31 days of December – all the way past Christmas Day to New Year's Eve.

Because we know every family is different, with different amounts of time available, we've put together a magical list of activities – both big and small – to help you enjoy meaningful moments together and spread the Christmas magic across the whole festive season (and until the kids go back to school!)

#MakeTheirsMagic



@familyaction



@family_action

We'd love to see how you're using our calendar this festive season so please use the hashtag and tag us for a chance to be featured in our stories and inspire other families!

Three steps to get started

- 1** Discuss the traditions you enjoy together as a family and those you'd like to do this year.
- 2** Find inspiration for new traditions by browsing our 31 magical ideas. We've categorised these to help you create a mix of activities to suit your family.
- 3** Use our blank calendar to put together a schedule that fits you (you don't have to fill up every day) or use our prefilled version.



Magical categories



Ways to give back



Acts of kindness



Screen-free

13+

Teen friendly



Babies/young family



Crafty



Intergenerational
(include wider family)



Family meals



Virtual/remote

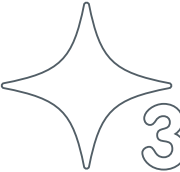



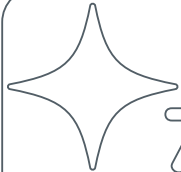

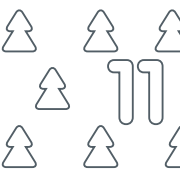














Out and about

Christmas calendar

Fill in and colour your magical schedule
of traditions old and new.



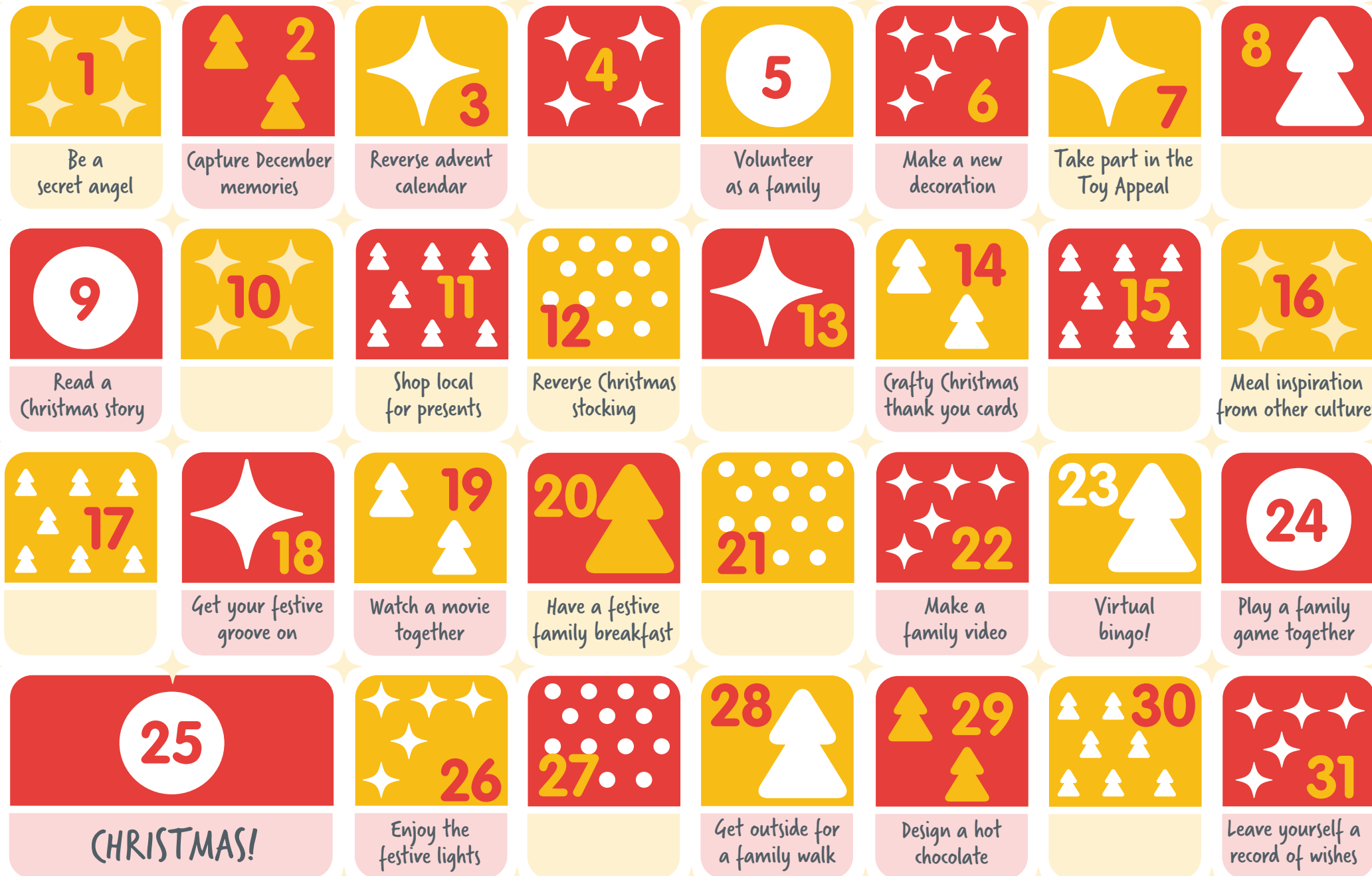
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Christmas calendar

Here's one we made earlier.

family
action

make
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31 magical ideas



Watch a Christmas movie

The UK rarely delivers good weather at Christmas time, so if it turns wet and miserable you have our permission to shut the curtains and escape with a good film. This activity can fill multiple calendar dates as family, extended family and friends discuss and book in their favourite movies. Streaming services generally have Christmas categories if you're stuck for inspiration and a trip to a local charity shop for DVDs can also support your community, inspire you and provide you with an afternoon's worth of entertainment. We would love you to share a picture of your family and tag us on social media with your favourite movie... Maybe you'll help us discover a new favourite film!



Easy 'gingerbread' house

Building a gingerbread house is a very traditional Christmas activity, but who has the time and engineering skill? There are kits that make the process easier but why not eliminate the stress entirely and simplify this tradition?

As an alternative to gingerbread, you can use biscuits or Rice Krispie treats. Ask each family member to create a mini-holiday house which, combined, creates a tasty family village. Sites like Pinterest are full of other simple suggestions using chocolate bars, biscuits, and even gingerbread, but keep realistic goals and let each family member get creative in their own way... How it tastes is more important than how it looks.



Shop local for presents

It has been a tough period for all businesses, and especially local family-run businesses. Use a navigation app or take a walk as a family to your nearest high street or shopping area and see if you can find a local business you could support by buying Christmas gifts there. You could also look out for Christmas fairs nearby or you could use online marketplaces like Etsy to support small businesses and source a more unique present in the process!



Crafty Christmas thank you

Over the last few years we've all become more aware of the contribution of key workers and the people who keep the wheels turning - whether that's nurses, supermarket workers or postal workers. Pavements and windows filled with colourful rainbows and thank you pictures were among the most uplifting and inspiring aspects of lockdown and beyond.

Our key workers are often at work over the festive period, so let's carry on showing our support. Maybe you could have a family craft afternoon creating some festive thank you cards - either using our Make Theirs Magic card template (overleaf) or creating your own. Either drop them off in your community, give them directly to local key workers or post them in your windows to show you care!

Make Theirs Magic Thank you card template

If you're doing a crafty Christmas thank you card you can use this template. All you need to do is colour in the card, cut it out carefully and drop it off in your community.



Fold



make
theirs
magic



Fold



Read a Christmas story

Reading with our children each night is a great way of bonding with them, and increasing their sense of comfort and security, so why not make a special effort to make it a tradition over the festive season? You can either read a single story or a story collection. It needn't be expensive as local libraries, discount stores and charity shops often have displays of Christmas books.

If you feel like purchasing or finding something special, however, here are some highly recommended stories and story collections:

Letters from Father Christmas

JRR Tolkien

Twelve Minutes to Midnight

Christopher Edge

The Christmas Star

Hilary Robinson

The Christmasaurus

The Christmasaurus & the Winter Witch

The Christmasaurus & the Naughty List

Tom Fletcher

Father Christmas & Me

The Girl Who Saved Christmas

A Boy Called Christmas

Matt Haig

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Roald Dahl

The Christmas Pig

JK Rowling

Diary of a Christmas Elf

The Night I Met Father Christmas

Ben Miller



"We often try to get out for a walk after lunch on Christmas Eve and, when we get home, our children will find a parcel has been delivered which has come from the pyjama elves. My eldest daughter was given a book for her 3rd birthday called 'The Pyjama Elves' by Hayden Edwards and we have had mysterious elf deliveries every year since."

Mum Heather, children aged 6 and 9



13+

Get your festive groove on

This is a great chance for older children to lead a fun family activity. Simply dig out, buy or even make a Christmas jumper and then pick a holiday-themed dance, using social media and video streaming platforms to inspire you. Then simply rehearse whenever, taking 10 minutes before dinner or in the kitchen before school to perfect that choreography. Once you're ready you can get those jumpers on and have a go for the cameras! If you upload your video to social media tag @family_action and use the hashtag #MakeTheirMagic so we're sure to see it!



Cultural Christmas cuisine

It's a big world out there and our cousins abroad have a lot to offer in the kitchen... German spiced Christmas cookies, Danish risalamande... Every country has its delicacies and if you ask your friends you might be surprised by the recipes they can provide.



Jigsaw puzzle

Jigsaw puzzles soared in popularity during lockdown as people looked for cosy activities that could be done at home. They are something you can do together as a family and can be adapted to your family's temperament - try challenging yourself to finish it over one evening or rainy afternoon, or setting it out in a quieter part of the house and encouraging family members to finish a small section each. Jigsaw puzzles can also be bought cheaply at local charity shops – just check all the pieces are there!



Enjoy the festive lights

Children love Christmas lights, so why not make a night of appreciating them? You can keep it local and explore your neighbourhood (just remember to drop one of our Make Theirs Magic cards in their letterbox!) or you can go a bit further afield with a longer walk or car journey. Local Facebook groups often share details of ambitious light displays but you might also find "light walks" organized by your council. If you've set a bit of cash set aside for festive treats, you could even visit your local stately home or National Trust property, which often dress their houses at Christmas... Just make sure you check the website first.



Design a Christmas card

If you are a family who loves to craft and draw - or even if you're not - you can challenge yourself to a creative afternoon designing a series of Christmas cards for friends and family. Cutting up old cards and magazines or going to discount and pound shops can also make this more cost effective. If you usually buy cards produced to benefit charities then you can still make your own and make a donation instead – as a charity we can tell you they often receive more money this way. All donations to our [Toy Appeal](#), for example, go directly to helping disadvantaged families.



Volunteer as a family

Volunteering is proven to be good for both your physical and mental health, so why not help both yourself and your local community? There may be volunteering opportunities at your local food bank, church or community centre. Alternatively you could decide to take care of your neighbourhood and go on a 'litter picking' walk or even register as one of the [Keep Britain Tidy campaign's Litter Heroes](#).

If you would like to help other families you could also [volunteer for Family Action](#) at one of our services nationwide or via our FamilyLine service. This service provides families with a listening ear, emotional support and guidance and practical information. All support takes place via telephone, web chat, text message or email and is free.



Reverse Christmas Stocking

Many of us can't help but feel a little guilty about the amount of money that is spent at Christmas – both what we have spent and what is spent on us.

Mum Alice said: "I get a huge feeling of guilt in the days following Christmas."

With this in mind, why not consider how you can use the 'reverse stocking' tradition as an opportunity to speak to your children about old toys they might not play with anymore or unwanted gifts?

Set aside a day to have a big clear out of their toys, books and clothes and ask them to fill a stocking with items that they would like to donate and give to other children to enjoy. Talk to them about how not every family has access to the same things. You can then donate them through local charity shops, where they will be affordable for those who need them and generate much-needed funds. The bonus for you is a nice tidy bedroom and room for new toys!

If you run out of time or find your children are too attached to their toys, check out our [Toy Appeal](#) as a quick and easy alternative to helping other children have a magical Christmas.



"My family are very generous, but we're all just sat around in this huge mountain of presents and paper and I think about how lucky we are, and how we perhaps don't appreciate it enough. Sometimes it all feels a bit excessive – particularly with the children, who are lucky to have so many loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends and extended family members all treating them with lovely gifts."

Mum Alice, children aged 6 and 9



Reverse advent calendar

Parent Karin shared a wonderful idea with Family Action for how she has made giving back at Christmas a yearly tradition:

"Several years ago, a friend shared a brilliant idea for Christmas giving. Instead of an advent calendar where you receive chocolate (or some other item) each day in the countdown to Christmas, you place an item like a gift, treat or toiletry aside to donate to a local food bank, FOOD Club or shelter.

Since the need is so great in December, we actually start ours a little earlier in November, but people are always in need of support all year round.

The only thing we've had to bear in mind is that the items have to keep well (so some foods are a no-no), but we've found small clothing options like socks, mittens, hats and suchlike work well. Simply think about what you would appreciate if you were in need during the holidays."

For more information about Family Action's FOOD clubs, including locations, visit [FOOD Club](#). Alternatively, you could visit the Trussell Trust, which runs nearly two-thirds of food banks in the UK. You can find them at [Trussell Trust](#).



A new decoration

Christmas trees are themselves a yearly tradition and, although only plastic trees survive more than one season, many families find themselves heading up to a dusty loft or a damp cellar to retrieve tinsel, lights and baubles.

For this reason, a great family tradition can be to invest in one new decoration every year. This can either be through buying something unique you've seen or by emotionally investing in creating a decoration all of your own... It's a lovely way to track time as children grow over the years and their interests change.

A top tip is to look for polymer clay sets at hobby and craft shops. This easy to sculpt material can be baked in an oven and hardens ready for use on your tree. Just remember to make sure there's a hoop to hang it from!



"Christmas was always my dad's favourite time of year and he would get giddy like a child; always adding more decorations to the collection (much to mum's annoyance because she was the one who had to tidy them all away).

When I was born dad gave me a Christmas tree which he had as a little boy and every year he would add a new decoration to it. My dad died from cancer seven years ago and, at 38 years old, I still put the tree up and add a new decoration every year. It must be around 70 years old now and it is a spectacularly tacky, mismatched, threadbare affair ...and I absolutely love it, especially as it conjures up so many happy memories of dad".

Devoted daughter Kate



Make some reindeer food

Why not follow in the footsteps of our Royal Patron Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge and craft some environmentally friendly reindeer food to leave outside. For a reindeer food recipe check out the [RSPCA's instructions](#).



Virtual bingo

This is a great activity for grandparents with theatrical flair – particularly if you can't get together for any reason. Simply post out bingo cards in advance and then host a virtual bingo night over video conferencing software, such as Zoom or Teams. You should be able to find bingo cards to print online (and it doesn't hurt if a few sweets "accidentally" find it into the package). Now, repeat after us. 38... Christmas cake!



"We make a photo calendar for my parents every year. They live abroad, so we don't see them that often, and usually not at Christmas. They really love receiving a calendar from the children that has lots of family photos from the year past. It's really lovely to see the calendar hanging in the background when we Skype with them every week".

Anja, children 8 and 13

Make a family montage of the year

Do you remember, years ago, families would send out Christmas cards with a letter sharing what had happened to them during the year?

While some of those letters might have been a bit OTT it was nice to find out what people had been up to. Why not update this tradition for the digital age and create a video with the year in review for your family? Simply choose a picture or video clip or two for each month of the year and make a video montage using video editing software on your computer, or via one of a number of free apps for your tablet or phone. You can then send an email including the video or share it via messaging apps or even social media. And, of course, if you want to go old school you could always print out a cringe-inducing family snap to pop in the post and make your friends smile. Just make sure you leave plenty of time for postage so that it arrives to open on Christmas day.



Design a hot chocolate

The winter months get darker earlier and are colder too so a DIY luxury hot chocolate night could be just the way to warm both your mood and your bones. It works both later at night and as a treat for youngsters returning from a blustery school run. It needn't be too expensive and there are plenty of hot chocolate mix recipes online.



Theme Christmas dress up

To introduce novelty or a different angle to the festivities you could take inspiration from mum Emily by giving them a theme and inspiring everyone to dress in a particular style one evening for fancy drinks or a Christmas meal.



Play a game together

Playing games together can help build family bonds, even if they get quite competitive. Local charity shops or Facebook groups often have secondhand board games at reasonable prices or you could find a pack of cards and teach family members games or tricks. Alternatively, the tech website [T3](#) publishes a list of its best board games each year, which is just an internet search away for enthusiasts. Engaging with board games is something that grandparents can often help with by introducing the younger generations to classic games, traditional card games or by teaching them a game like chess. In return the kids could reciprocate by showing them their favourite game and teaching them how to play it online or on a games console. Grandad might surprise you with his racing skills!



13+

Make a festive playlist

Seasonal hits and traditional carols help us feel 'Christmassy'. Why not create a playlist of all your favourite festive songs and have a kitchen disco one night? Or you could create one as a soundtrack for other Christmas traditions like wrapping presents.

"I make a 'driving home for Christmas playlist, to listen to in the car. It's a mix of festive songs and the latest hits to keep the kids happy"

Mum Mel



Festive family breakfast

Yes, we know that usually the lunches and dinners steal the show at Christmas but there's no reason you can't mix it up and create a festive themed breakfast. There are loads of holiday-themed ready-made items in stores this month, such as tree-shaped crumpets, mini Christmas puddings and holiday biscuits, but you could also use holiday-themed cookie cutters to make festive toast, pancakes, eggs or waffles!

Ask your children to contribute by suggesting different embellishments or taking charge of the table decorations. You could even try a picnic breakfast in the lounge or, if the weather allows, in the garden or at a local park! This is an ideal activity for a weekend slot in your Christmas calendar.



Join our Toy Appeal

Each year, generous individuals and companies help make Christmas a little more magical for the children we work with and, in 2020, through our Toy Appeal we delivered toys to over 11,700 children. This obviously has a wonderful impact on their Christmas, but often also becomes hugely important to those who give too.

As mum Elizabeth told us: "Knowing that a child will have the excitement of a gift to open and that they won't be left out of the magic of Christmas is such a warm feeling.

"Every child deserves to have something and as a mum I can also imagine how much it could mean to parents going through tough times.

"It's like a little message that someone has your back, and really wishes the best to you and your children".

If you are equally inspired to help then you can find out more about the appeal by visiting [Toy Appeal](#).



Get outside for a family walk

It's a simple idea, but few things in life are as rewarding as leaving our phones, cars and everyday lives at home and going for a walk as a family.

It's a great thing to do with extended families you don't see often as it gives you a chance to catch up and share the small details of your lives, which can get lost in more organised family events and outings.

To entice bored children out of the house, why not combine it with a Christmas-themed scavenger hunt?

There are no rules regarding how ambitious you need to get and you can stay in a local park, or head out to a nearby wood. A visit beforehand is a good idea though, as it gives you an idea of local landmarks and items to look out for.

Example sights you can look out for include

- Spotting a robin
- Finding red berries (make sure children are supervised as some are poisonous)
- A holly bush or ivy leaf
- A frost pattern or icicles

Remember that, as an adult, you can guide proceedings, so it's easy to ensure children see key landmarks.

"When we were kids, my brothers and I spent hours whiling the days away doing not much at all. It's what you do as kids and sometimes I wish I could still do that now I'm an adult! It's nice to force yourselves to pack your to-do list away for a while and enjoy their company".

Dad Sam



Revisit your favourite childhood traditions

A lovely conversation topic over a family dinner is to discuss the Christmas traditions you enjoyed when you were a child. Children love hearing about your experiences when you were little and, you never know, it might inspire you to recreate a particularly special one with your children. Carrying on well-loved traditions helps us keep happy memories alive and rediscover the magic of our Christmas childhoods, as television presenter, podcast host, author and Family Action supporter Anna Williamson (pictured) explains here:

"Christmas is undoubtedly my favourite time of the year. My Grandma and Dad were - and have always been - massive fans of it. For us as a family it's very much all about being together. I'm lucky to have a tight-knit family and we absolutely love all being together for the festive period. We have one tradition which has been going strong for over 40 years now: my brothers and I still have 'stockings' in the same old threadbare pillowcases from when we were kids in the 80s. You're never too old to enjoy the delights of what Father Christmas has left overnight!"



13+

Capture December memories

Many of us spend a lot of time on our phones and our day-to-day activities are often documented digitally, sitting in folders on your phone or in the "cloud", waiting to be swiped as you look back at memories.

Why not take those daily photo and video snippets and create a digital memory box, a festive movie or a "real-life" photo collage or book?

This is another great activity to hand over to a tech-savvy tween/teen, putting their focus on their phone to good use!

To inspire you, follow us on social media for 31 themes related to December as a prompt to help you create a photo/video a day. Get snapping!



Decorate your neighbourhood

Thanks to street parties, shopping visits for older neighbours and more time spent at home, many of us are closer to those living nearby than ever before. Why not let them know you care by crafting decorations and hanging them in your street? If you want to keep it simple you can cut out stars from paper or card and decorate them with designs, stickers, glitter, positive messages and holiday wishes. To protect them, you can either laminate them or (to be more eco-friendly) put them in a plastic wallet.



First Christmas

If you have or know a child having their first Christmas it can be a lovely idea to start a tradition of creating a special ornament to commemorate each year. For example, you can make a handprint ornament - either from paper/card or using decorated salt dough (don't forget to document the date). This can be the perfect memento of your child's growth and one that can be repeated each year until they're a teenager. Or, for those who prefer less mess, consider making a video of the same event each year to capture the years passing and the children getting older.

"Each Christmas Eve my husband and I watch the compilation of the years over a cheese board and some wine, while I shed a tear."

Mum Zian



Be someone's secret angel

Most of us will be familiar with secret Santa, where friends are assigned another member of the group and tasked with buying a gift for them. Christmas Angel is a modern spin that works best for family members, where you are given a family member's name and, rather than buy them a gift, you act as their secret angel for the festive period and do nice things for them.

On Christmas Eve the family gets together for the big reveal of who was each other's Christmas Angel. This is a great way to promote good vibes among, for instance, argumentative siblings and you'll likely get a cup of tea out of it at the very least!



Leave yourself a record of your wishes for the year

The delightful suggestion below from a mum at one of our services is a great way of ensuring you appreciate what the year has brought you, and reflect upon the year you've had.



“Every year we put a note in our decoration box saying what we wish for in the following year. It’s something my parents did, and that my grandma did with my mum before that. It really shows how much things can change in a year, such as when my mum wasn’t very well one year and was struggling with depression. She wrote a note wishing to be happier and when she read the note the following year she was so much better, which was wonderful.

I’ve done it since I was a child and at the beginning I used to wish for silly stuff, like bigger toys, but as I got older it became more personal – like when I was pregnant and I asked for a healthy baby. Instead, it became about my hopes and dreams”



Sing a Christmas song

Learn all the words to The Twelve Days of Christmas and sing together, not forgetting to really go for it every time you get to five golden rings! This is something you could do remotely with lots of other family members, with each taking a few lines each.

It goes without saying that this can also be applied to any song or even rap... We just really like The Twelve Days of Christmas!

Teens and Christmas

It can be difficult managing the different needs and expectations of family members at Christmas, but particularly so where teens are involved. As one mum tells us:

"Past Christmas's were filled with anticipation and magical excitement when our children were younger. Both my kids would hunch over the Christmas catalogues mailed out to us, turning down the corners of the pages of the things that were going "on the list".

They would be up at the crack of dawn to eat their advent calendar chocolates and the season was a busy, joyful one for me as I contributed to PTA drives for Christmas fetes, helped with nativity costumes and attended carol concerts.



But now Christmas in our house looks so very different and I am wistful for the innocence and warmth of the past. My 9-year-old and 13-year-old create wish lists on Amazon inspired by YouTube unboxing videos. This year, one catalogue managed to arrive in the post but I don't even think many stores create catalogues anymore.

For my teenager, the lure of her room has become too great.

We now generally only see her when she needs food, is coming home or leaving the house. I know that this is her asserting her independence and boundaries but I do miss the little girl who needed me to do almost everything for her. My son has also become considerably more independent and spends more time playing on his console and connecting with his friends.

Suddenly I have a lot more time on my hands and have forgotten how to fill that time!"

We spoke to Professor Paul McGee, author of "YESSS! The SUMO Secrets To Being a Positive Confident Teenager" to help us put together some tips on how to understand your teen's changing needs and how to keep your relationship with them on track.

Support for families

The Christmas season isn't always the easiest time. If you feel you need support and information about any aspect of family life, or just a listening ear, contact our free [FamilyLine](#) service.

Paul McGee's top tips for families with teenager



They need that sleep!

Teenagers' brains and bodies are still developing and won't mature fully until their mid-twenties, so forgive them their lie-ins and the odd over-reaction! (even if they do take place on Christmas morning).

Allow them their space

Our teenagers are maturing into adults, and although they might not be quite there yet, they are trying to carve out their own space in the world. Most of us wouldn't want to hang out with our parents all the time as adults, so we have to accept that we're no longer the centre of their world. It doesn't mean they no longer need us.

Make the most of the time you have

Although it might be tempting to complain about acting as a taxi service, try to see this as an opportunity to chat and catch up.

Pick your moments

Despite it sometimes appearing to the contrary teens want to hear they are loved and appreciated. Just make sure that you don't embarrass them when you do so. Christmas is a perfect time for this, as cards allow us to write messages that might not be acknowledged in the moment, but can be cherished later.



Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families and brighter lives.

We provide innovative and effective services and support to many of the UK's most vulnerable people, helping individuals, families and communities address the challenges they face through practical, emotional and financial support.

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