

The 12 Ways of Christmas: A Guide to Preparing for the Holidays

Published on Babble.com November 18, 2010

A partridge in a pear tree...

Or a parrot in a palm tree. It doesn't matter what's pictured on it, but have a giant jigsaw puzzle on hand during the holidays, when family members are hanging around the house together for long stretches. The puzzle should be set up on a table that needn't be disturbed, since work on it will be intermittent. It's nice having a shared activity (other than watching TV), and a puzzle is accessible to anyone. Kids could help complete it if you work with them to isolate the pieces to one particular section. As areas of the puzzle come together, you'll all enjoy a common sense of accomplishment. Maybe you'll even decide to make it a tradition.

Two pairs of gloves...

If you're having overnight guests, make space in your entryway for bins or baskets which can hold their gloves, hats, and scarves. With a designated spot for these winter items, your company won't have to leave their stuff lying around everywhere; their things will not become commingled with yours (and potentially forgotten at the end of the visit); and you'll help avoid the scenario in which everyone waits in the car, bundled up, as Gramps searches your closet for Granny's brown leather glove. Also, clear space in the coat closet and have a few sturdy hangers at the ready. It feels good to be prepared. When your guests arrive, you can toast your reunion instead of running around trying to get organized.

Three Cornish hens...

If you're hosting a special holiday meal—or bringing a dish to someone's table—and you have two left hands in the kitchen, now's not the time to crack open a Julia Child cookbook for the first time. If your supermarket does not offer ready entrees, and the cost or concept of catering is impractical, see if there's a culinary school or a vocational school with a culinary department in your area. The students here work under the supervision of a chef and probably complete a whole unit on Cornish hens. Best of all, the prices of student creations—which, besides entrees, may include side dishes, appetizers, and elegant desserts—are unbeatably low. Since these schools often have restaurants on the premises, you can sample potential dishes in advance.

Four migrating birds...

If you travel for Christmas and your children lament not having Santa visit their home, be sure to hang up stockings. On the day you leave for your trip, once the kids are safely out the door, run back into your home to use the bathroom (wink, wink). Having placed the stocking stuffers in one bag ahead of time, you'll need to just quickly distribute them. To minimize clutter, and because my children receive enough gifts from both Santa and family, I like to mostly keep stocking stuffers practical: bags of nuts or fun snacks, chocolates, mini cereal boxes, fridge magnets, hair accessories, colorful socks, individual popcorn packets which everyone can share on family movie nights.

Five golden strings...

Actually, just one white one will do for displaying the holiday cards you receive. On a stretch of blank wall, extend a string or piece of yarn between two nails. Set it at a height that your children can reach. Once you fasten lots of paperclips (or clothespins) to the string, you are ready to hang the many cards landing in your mailbox. Forget fussing around with tape rings and climbing on stepstools to stick cards on your doorframe or walls. Since you've hung the string within reach of your child, displaying cards could be her job now, one she might delight in.

Six guests a-lying...

... around your home. Whatever the number of houseguests, add some simple touches to make them feel welcome. Put chocolates on the pillow the first night they arrive. If you can't make space in drawers, provide a chair on which someone could place their luggage so they need not bend down, especially if it's an older relative. Set out a spare toothbrush and the mini-size hand lotion you picked up at a hotel. Have the kids make a welcome sign or a snowflake with the guest's name to tape to their door. To start training them to become gracious hosts, have the kids take drink orders during a visit.

Seven slippers slipping...

Seven slippers means one is missing. Hm, a holiday caper. Anyway, have an even number of slippers or slipper socks near your front door and offer them to visitors when they walk in. This is a dual purpose move: It gives them the hint to remove their shoes or boots and also ensures they will have warm, cozy feet during their visit. To facilitate the process, set out a chair, which the older folks will appreciate since they may need to sit while removing boots. If it's wet outside, you might also want to place an extra mat, old towel, or plastic tray in the foyer for parking shoes and avoiding puddles on the floor.

Eight gifts a-gifting...

When you need a token gift for someone and a bottle of wine or box of chocolates seems tired, head to the grocery store for practical, sure-hit gifts—the kind that, instead of adding to someone's clutter, will be consumed and enjoyed. Give someone “a weekend breakfast”—a bag of ground coffee along with a muffin mix, a ready pound cake or chocolate babka; a jug of fresh-squeezed orange juice and a couple croissants; or bananas, Nutella, and a nice box of tea. For “a special afternoon snack,” pick up a box of gourmet cookies, dark chocolate-covered raisins and/or roasted almonds. Consider “a treat for a Friday night”—a six-pack of good beer and a bag of high-end potato chips, or some interesting popcorn, whether or not you accompany that with a Netflix certificate. Most of these unconventional gifts can be slipped into a gift bag, or else wrapped in tissue paper and cinched at the top with ribbon.

Nine hours driving...

If your holidays entail traveling a long distance to be with family, pack your carry-on bag strategically. Besides the usual for a road trip—snacks, toys, books, barf bag, trash bag, a movie if you have a portable DVD player—pack a sun shade for the young travelers. Because the suction cups of portable screens often fail, opt for an old pillowcase or t-

shirt. Roll down the window, insert the top of your makeshift shade, and close the window. Also, Magna-doodle pads are invaluable on long trips. Depending on your child's age, you can write letters and numbers for them to identify; write words for them to try and read; have them practice writing words, counting and making tally marks, solving math problems. With time and no distractions now, you can guide them through the challenges in *Highlights* magazine or read them animal fact cards, so bring along anything you have intended but never gotten to.

Ten lords a-leaping...

Who *isn't* ready to leap out of that car after an endless day on the road? When you cannot stand to read one more animal fact card, when you need your children to entertain themselves, at the next pit stop tie a string from one handle bar to the other in the back seat, and they now have a zip line for Polly Pockets, plastic monkeys, etc. To help attach things to the line, pack plastic baby links, pipe cleaners, twist ties. If they're old enough, suggest they make and hang ornaments. To this end, pack construction paper, ribbon, kid scissors and the like, along with some Christmas tree hooks. (You'll be vacuuming crumbs out of the back seat anyway, so what's the harm of some paper bits?) Alternatively, if they can comfortably reach the window and you're okay with the possibility of sticky residue, bring some tape and/or foam stickers so they could decorate their windows. Keep them busy and happy as you go to grandmother's house over the river and through the woods.

Eleven puzzles puzzling...

Is your child still challenged by all eleven puzzles on the shelf? It's the ideal time to purge toys. It feels especially good to do it at the start of the holiday season because you can donate your children's toys to one of the collections that spring up now. To locate a charity, Google or ask around your local places of worship, which sometimes organize toy collections. It's a win-win. You create space for gifts coming in, and other families get toys which still have lots of playing potential. (Drop the fantasy of selling used toys on eBay. The couple dollars you might bring in—if your item sells—are not worth the time you spent photographing, posting your listing, packaging, and waiting at the post office. Invest yourself instead in baking cookies or making snowflakes with your kids.)

Twelve drummers drumming...

In the midst of the hap-hap-happiest time of the year—the gifts, the parties, the cards, the wait to meet Santa, the relatives, the meals, the end-of-year to-do's—it may feel as if twelve drummers are drumming in your head. To make them stop, temporarily at least, make time to be with your true love. If the cost of a date night out is prohibitive or going out seems like work, make it a date night in. But I don't mean vegging out on the couch with the TV on. Put a bit of effort into it. Pick up an assortment of cheese and fruit—try grapes, apples, dried cherries—plus crackers or a fresh baguette and maybe a new spread. Pour a couple drinks. Pipe in some music and turn down the volume of the jingle bells. The gift of attention you give each other is probably better than anything you could buy at a store and place under the tree.