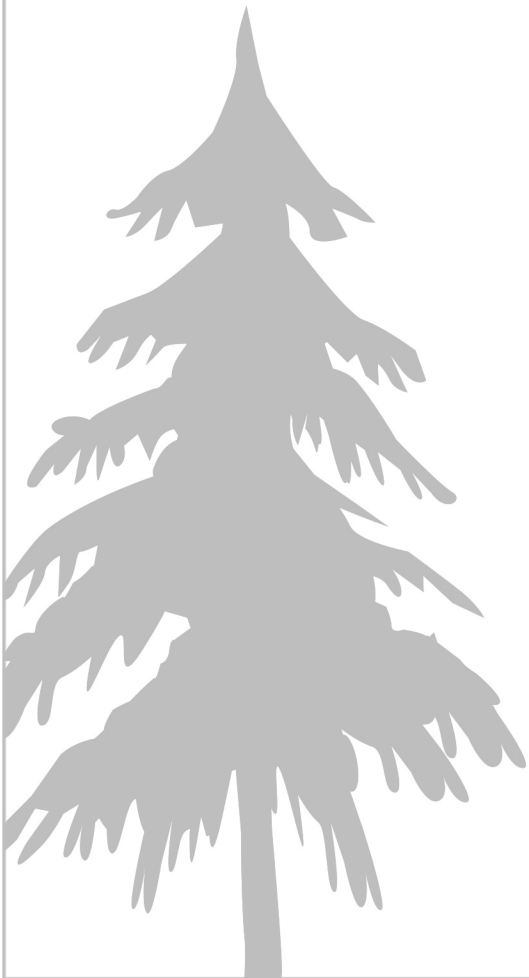


# CHRISTMAS YOUR WAY



TIPS TO HELP  
YOU SIMPLIFY  
THE HOLIDAYS

# Christmas Your Way

Getting organized is half the battle when it comes to enjoying the holiday season, and simplifying is the other half!

Prepare for the holidays now – before the Christmas parties, holiday sales and a million other obligations are in full swing – and you'll be able to step back and enjoy the season fully as it gets closer. You'll also have better control over what you really want to do as a family and when to say no.

I love everything about Christmas – the decorations, the gift giving, the baking, the family get-togethers, all of it. We work really hard to focus on Jesus' birth as part of our celebrations as well, but honestly, I'd love Christmas even if there wasn't a "reason for the season."

Thankfully, I married a man who loves it as much as me, and the first year we were married we started an annual tradition of decorating for Christmas on Halloween. I know that's a little nuts, but we love having our decorations up as we go about our holiday preparations, and we're already anxious to start decorating this year!

Here's what we'll be talking about in this short guide to organizing & simplifying your Christmas:

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Each chapter includes an action step you can take to get organized, and you'll also find links a [free printable Christmas planner](#) at the end!

## **Making – and Sticking To – A Budget**

I want to start by offering one simple piece of advice: Do not use credit cards to finance your Christmas.

I know you love your children very much and you want them to have an amazing, spectacular Christmas. And I know your extended family pressures you into elaborate gift exchanges. And I know that you hate the idea that anyone would think of you as “poor” if you don’t keep up with the rest of them.

I know all that, but is it *really* worth the stress of credit card bills that take months to pay off? Is it worth the worry and strain on your marriage? If it is worth it to you, there’s really nothing else I can say, but if you’re overspending to keep up with the expectations of others and you regret it every year, please, please reconsider.

On a brighter note, now is probably the perfect time to reconsider your holiday spending habits.

Everyone knows someone who has been touched by the recession, and millions of households are cutting their expenses in the face of the economic woes of the past couple of years.

This could be your year to turn over a new leaf when it comes to Christmas gifts — with less extravagant gifts and more handmade gifts from the heart — and no one will bat an eye!

### **Creating Your Budget**

The first step to planning for Christmas — because it affects nearly every other topic we’ll cover — is to sketch a realistic budget. You need to take a look at your finances and decide how much money you can set aside for Christmas without relying on credit cards. If you’ve been saving money in a Christmas fund all year, you probably already have a good idea of what your total budget will be. If not, sit down with a calendar, a calculator and your monthly budget and sketch out your Christmas budget.

It’s important to do this step *before* you start dreaming about gift ideas, new decor for your home and events you want to attend with your family because it’s much easier to make your spending fit within your budget than it is to stretch your budget to fit your spending.

If you’re not living on a tight budget and have plenty in savings, you can plan your Christmas budget from the opposite perspective, writing down the amount you want to spend in each category and coming up with a total number that way. However, it’s still important to have a written budget so that you don’t get to the end of the Christmas season only to look back and realize you spent way more than you intended.

## Increase Your Budget

The good news is that if you're discouraged by the final number, there's still time to pad the budget.

Begin decluttering your home, keeping an eye out for items that can be sold on eBay or repurposed into thoughtful handmade gifts. If you're a talented seamstress or baker, you may be able to earn money by selling handmade gifts or baked goods. Or you may decide to pick up a seasonal retail job. [Swagbucks](#) is a great way to earn points just for searching the internet, which you can then cash out for Amazon.com gift cards.

If you are looking for extra money for the holidays, there are dozens of options for you to consider, but you need to make that your priority this week because at some point soon you will run out of time.

## Allocate Your Budget

Once you have your *realistic* budget written down, begin making decisions about how you will spend it. Depending on your priorities and the amount of your budget, you may find that the bulk of your budget goes towards supplies for baking or handmade gifts. If you've been saving all year, you might have more freedom in your spending or be able to set some aside for home decor or entertaining as well.

Be sure to think through all possible expenditures — such as meals for the church's potluck, baked goods for your neighbors, wrapping paper, bows and so on — so that you're not surprised by it later in the planning process. I've suggested many additional spending categories on the [Christmas Budget Worksheet](#) as well.

The key is to take the amount that you can realistically expect to have and come up with a spending plan so that you don't end up relying on credit cards. If you're brainstorming additional income ideas, add those amounts to the budget in parentheses so that you have a spending plan with or without the extra cash.

**Action Steps:** Use the [Christmas Budget Worksheet](#) to sketch out a realistic spending plan. Ignoring the budget won't make things easier, so please don't skip this step!

## Planning Your Holiday Calendar

Money and budgets may be the main source of stress during the holidays, but calendars and schedules are probably a close second!

Trying to balance family time and social obligations, shopping for and making gifts, baking and entertaining and still finding time to focus on the “reason for the season” can stress out even the most laid back person.

The key to a simple Christmas is deciding which activities are really important to you and then keeping a detailed calendar — not just of events and obligations but also as a way to make sure there’s time to make, buy and wrap gifts, send cards, bake cookies and everything else you want to do between now and Christmas.

## Enjoying It All

So how do you juggle it all without just saying no to everything?

As someone who loves everything about Christmas, I won’t be the one to tell you to just automatically cut all of those activities out so that you’re not busy this holiday season. I believe it’s okay to be busy during the holidays if you’re busy for the right reasons — *enjoying your family, making memories and blessing other people* — but if you’re stressed out by everything you want to do, you have three choices:

1. Stay stressed out and miss out on an opportunity to enjoy it all.
2. Cut out some activities until you’re less stressed.
3. Find a way to manage your schedule so you can do the things you love without getting stressed out.

## Making Choices About Your Calendar

To start, how do you decide which activities are worth your time?

Start by choosing your activities carefully. There are a lot of expectations and obligations placed on families during this time of year, and those are often a major source of stress.

Visiting family, volunteering and going to see Christmas lights are all good things. But if you don’t have time to do everything without turning into Scrooge (and I speak from experience here), then you need to prioritize and choose the activities that matter most.

For example, you may not be able to attend 2 or 3 different family get-togethers on Christmas Day this year. Try inviting everyone to you instead.

Likewise, volunteering and charity are good, but there's no reason you have to cram it all into the holiday season. Choose one opportunity to give this season, and spread the rest out over the rest of the year instead of trying to do it all at one time!

Sending Christmas cards, baking cookies and making gifts are also all *good* activities, but you have to decide which are the *best* and plan your holidays accordingly. Remember how your momma always said, "It's the thought that counts"? Well, cards, cookies and gifts made out of obligation rather than love are really no better than nothing at all.

Above all, know what your priorities are ahead of time so that you can continue to prune your calendar, if needed, as we get closer to Christmas.

## Finding the Time

Once you've decided which events and activities are important to you, how do you make sure there's time to get everything done?

If your holiday plans include making gifts, baking cookies, visiting family, volunteering and looking for ways to make memories with your children, but you don't plan on starting any of those activities until after Thanksgiving, chances are you're going to end up stressed. Instead, start your holiday plans now and enjoy the preparations for the holiday *before* the busyness sets in.

## Creating a Calendar

With that in mind, I'd encourage you to take some time now to look at the calendar and begin planning your Christmas preparations and schedule. Work backwards and choose a date that you'd like to be done with gifts, baking, etc. so that you can enjoy the rest of the time with your family. I usually try to be done two weeks before Christmas (although there are always last minute things to do!).

Next, think through the list of things you need to do: buy gifts, make gifts, wrap gifts, mail gifts, send Christmas cards, bake cookies, etc. Put each and every activity on the calendar.

By assigning each task a specific day or week to be completed, you'll have a better idea of what you can realistically get done and a calendar to help keep you on track.

**Action Steps:** Use the [printable Christmas Checklist](#) or create your own [Christmas Master To-Do List](#) to keep track of all of your holiday preparations. Use our [Christmas Planning Calendar](#) or start with the [blank Christmas Calendar printable](#), assigning specific days and weeks for each activity. Begin adding family and social obligations to the calendar as plans are made as well.

## **Homemade Gifts from the Heart**

Simple gift giving doesn't have to mean pruning your gift list to just your immediate family, although it certainly can be if that's what you need to do for your own sanity. But it does require some planning and forethought so that you're not scrambling the week before Christmas to figure out what to get for your grandmother or the neighbor across the street!

### **Making a Master Gift List**

Take some time to sit down and make a master gift list of everyone you might possibly want to give a gift too — family, friends, neighbors, doctors' offices, church staff, etc. I'm not saying you have to give gifts to all of those groups of people, but if it's important to you, make sure they're on the list!

If you're feeling overwhelmed by your list, go ahead and prune it down and choose the people/groups that are most important to you.

For instance, we don't give gifts to our extended families. It's just not very realistic with 11 sets of aunts and uncles and various cousins and second cousins and cousins once removed. Instead, I usually try to put together little bags of homemade candy or cookies to hand out at family gatherings.

I do love surprising our church staff and doctors' offices with a basket of homemade cookies as well, just because I appreciate all that they do for us throughout the year. But I tend to leave those things for last and cut them out if it becomes too overwhelming.

### **Write Down Gift Ideas**

Once you have your master list written out, take some time to group the people on your list. For example, we've always found it easier to give the same basic gift to all of our parents and grandparents, usually something sentimental and centered around our girls — a handprint calendar, a DVD of pictures and home videos, etc. You might group doctors' offices, church staff and neighbors together or friends and neighbors, etc.

Rewrite your list with this new grouping and begin jotting down gift ideas next to each person and/or group. When it comes to baking and gift baskets, try to be as specific as possible — i.e., "peanut butter blossoms, chocolate-covered candy canes and hot cocoa mix" — so that you'll be ready for the next stage of planning.

For other gifts, it's better to start out with some general ideas so that you don't find yourself pigeonholed and searching for the perfect "teal v-neck cashmere sweater" for hours on end.

If you want to do more handmade gifts but aren't sure where to start, I'll share some resources for brainstorming in the next chapter, but if you have any general thoughts about what each person might like — i.e., "jewelry," "girly," "sports," etc. — you can include those notes at this stage as well.

If you haven't even thought about gifts at all, you may want to start with a simple key — such as B for baked goods, H for handmade gifts and S for store-bought gifts — next to each person's name. Don't wait too long to begin writing down more specific ideas, especially for baked goods and handmade gifts, so that you can start making those gifts sooner rather than later.

## Gift Lists for Children

It can be easy to go overboard, especially when it comes to giving gifts to our own children at Christmas, but if you're looking for a way to simplify Christmas and gift giving, here are a few ideas:

- **Set a limit on the number of gifts you give each of your children.** Many families set a limit of three gifts (like the three wise men).
- **Try a family or group gift instead.** Because our girls receive so many gifts from their grandparents and great-grandparents, we've decided to stick with one bigger gift for all of them and then a stocking of smaller things for each of them. For older children, you may do a family experience gift such as tickets to an event or show everyone's been wanting to go see.
- **Set a dollar limit.** This one can be dangerous because you can buy a whole lot of junk for even \$25 or \$50, and I'm not sure that really simplifies anything at all. But if you don't give into the urge to get as much as possible within the limit, this could work as well.

As with everything, the key to simplifying your gift giving is to have a plan in place, preferably written down, ahead of time!

**Action Steps:** Take some time to make your [Christmas Gift List](#), brainstorming gift ideas for each person on your list. Group the people on your list according to similar ideas. And then prioritize your list so that you're able to prune as you go if you find the holidays getting to stressful or unmanageable.



# Stress-Free Gift Shopping

There is nothing quite like heading to the mall on Christmas Eve to watch as people scurry in and out of stores in search of the perfect gift while the clock counts down to closing. I can't imagine that shopping on Christmas Eve makes for a simple Christmas (although I guess one could argue the rest of the season was simple!), so here are six tips to simplify your gift shopping:

## 1. Make a list.

Use the notes on your gift list to create a shopping list, grouping by likely store whenever possible. Working from an actual shopping list rather than trying to keep track of the gifts you need to buy in your head means you're less likely to get home and realize you forgot the one gift you wanted to get the most.

## 2. Shop early.

Once you have your budget and gift list in place, go ahead and get started (as your budget allows — using cash, not credit cards). You will avoid the crowds and the pressure of having to find a gift before time runs out, and it will be one less thing to do in the midst of the holiday season.

## 3. Shop during off-peak hours.

If you still need to shop once the holiday season kicks into full gear, try to avoid the mall in the afternoon and on weekends. Instead, do your shopping first thing in the morning when the mall will be much less crowded. The shelves and racks will be neater and easier to sort through, and you'll be able to get help from a sales associate much easier.

## 4. Wear comfortable clothing.

Whenever you end up shopping, be sure to wear comfortable clothes and shoes so that you can focus on the task at hand. If possible, leave your big purse at home or in the car and slip your debit cards, cash, phone and keys into a secure pocket (like one that zips on your jacket) or take a lightweight purse that you can string across your chest so that you still have both hands free instead.

## 5. Shop online.

A great alternative to going to the mall is to shop online. Not only can you browse hundreds of stores, but you can search for specific items across the internet, making it easier to find exactly what you're looking for. You still want to start your shopping early in order to avoid paying rush delivery charges, though!

For great deals all season long, be sure to subscribe to [Jungle Deals & Steals](#), where we share the best Amazon.com deals every day!

## 6. Look for coupons, deals and sales.

Use blogs such as [For the Mommas](#), [Money Saving Mom](#) and [Deal Seeking Mom](#), and sites such as [Retail Me Not](#) to find the latest coupons and coupon codes for all of your shopping needs. I almost never place an order online without a coupon code, and Retail Me Not makes it easy to find available coupon codes for almost every store.

**Action Steps:** Use the [Christmas Shopping List printable](#) to start creating a shopping list for all of the gifts you need to purchase. As you place online or catalog orders, use the [Christmas Order Tracking printable](#) to track each one so that you don't have to search through your email or debit card statements to figure out which packages you're still waiting for.

## Creating Family Traditions & Memories

Almost everyone has family traditions — for the everyday mundane things as well as for holidays and special events — but have you ever taken the time to write down your Christmas traditions?

In the midst of a busy holiday season, it's easy to lose our focus and forget about the things that are most important to us, but a written list of traditions helps us remember what is really important and make the time for those things.

### Other Benefits of Writing Down Your Christmas Traditions

- **Evaluate.** You can evaluate each one as your family grows and matures over the years. Take the time to talk about which traditions are most important to each member of your family and consider scrapping any that just take a lot of time, effort or money but aren't that meaningful.
- **Prioritize.** The simple truth is that you can't possibly incorporate every great idea you come across into your own family traditions. By writing down your current traditions and ones you might like to try in the future, you're able to evaluate and prioritize them in light of each other.
- **Remember.** I don't know about you, but on more than one occasion I've gotten to the end of the holiday season only to realize I forgot an activity or tradition that I had planned on including. Having a written list prevents that from happening, especially if you update it after the holidays and throughout the year as you think of ideas.
- **Adapt.** Your list of traditions can be a working document so that you can make notes about things that went great or went wrong and how you'd like to do them differently in the future.

**Action Steps:** Use the [Christmas Family Traditions printable](#) to make a list of the traditions you'd like to include as part of your holiday celebrations. Do you need to purchase or prepare anything ahead of time? Be sure to update your budget and shopping list as needed!

## Organizing Your Christmas Cards

I love receiving Christmas cards in the mail, especially those with updated family pictures. We hang ours along the garland on our staircase, and it becomes just one more reminder that Christmas is about people, not stuff!

Whether you hand-address or print labels for your Christmas cards, send a simple card or a holiday letter, write a personal note in each or include a picture, it's never too early to start getting your Christmas cards ready.

### Creating a Digital Address Book

If you don't yet have a digital address book on your computer, now is a great time to create one. Rather than keeping track of dozens of pieces of paper or having to erase or white-out addresses as they change in your paper address book, you can simply update the file in one location and keep a printed copy in your [home management notebook](#).

You could use a document or spreadsheet, a contact management program like Outlook or Gmail, or a secure online address book.

You should also make a list of any addresses you need — families that you know have moved during the year, new friends or acquaintances you'd like to add to your list, etc. Take the next week or so to track down those addresses so you won't be scrambling to find them at the last minute.

### Making Decisions About Your Christmas Cards

Take some time to decide what type of cards you're going to send so that you can add the cost to your budget and begin purchasing or ordering what you need:

- Do you want to send traditional cards or photo cards?
- Will you include a holiday letter or not?
- Do you want to include an updated family photo or not?
- What about digital cards to save time, money & be "green"?

Even though it will probably take you a few weeks to get your Christmas cards ready, knowing exactly what you need to do and purchase will make it easier to break the process into steps and add those steps to your Christmas calendar so that you're not left scrambling at the beginning of December.

## Other Tips for Simplifying Your Christmas Card Process

- If you traditionally send a Christmas letter, begin drafting that now so that you have plenty of time to edit and make changes. You'll be happier with the end result if you don't have to rush.
- Use your evening or weekend TV time to address and sign your cards over the next couple of weeks. Break your list down into manageable batches and do a little bit every day.
- Be sure to keep a few extra cards ready in case you receive a card from someone who is not on your list and want to reciprocate.

**Action Steps:** Use the enclosed [Christmas Card Worksheet](#) to keep track of all of the information you need for your Christmas cards. Use the [Christmas Address Book](#) to write down any additional addresses that you need to add to your digital address book.

## Preparing Your Home for the Holidays

The holidays are quickly approaching, and none of us want to be stuck frantically cleaning before a family gathering or dealing with clutter as we try to make room for our holiday decorations.

Take time to declutter and clean your home *now*, and then put a plan in place to maintain it throughout the holiday season.

### Declutter

Declutter. Declutter. Declutter. With less stuff, you have more time and energy to fully embrace life, more money in your pocket and a better perspective on what's really important in life.

Just think about how many times someone talks about all the stuff in their home or clutter that's driving them nuts or wanting to just get rid of it all. On the other hand, it's rare that you hear someone bemoaning the fact that they chose the path of less stuff. In fact, most people who begin the journey of decluttering find it so invigorating that they end up decluttering more and more over time.

If you're just getting started, don't feel like you need to turn into a minimalist overnight. Start by walking through your home and gathering up anything that you're obviously ready to part with — trash, broken toys, cheap knick knacks that you never really liked in the first place, etc.

Then, as you go room by room, think about the last time you used an item, whether you truly love it and how hard it would be to replace it down the road if you change your mind. Begin boxing up things that you're ready to let go of, either for immediate donation or to live in a sealed box in the basement for 3-6 months. Once that time has passed, if you haven't missed the stuff in the box, you can safely donate it without worrying about regrets down the road.

If you've already begun decluttering, it may be time to get more serious about it and make the harder decisions, but it's okay to do a little bit at a time!

### Deep Clean

Once you've cleaned out the clutter in each room, you can begin deep cleaning: Wipe the baseboards, clean behind and under furniture, wash the windows. Clean upholstery, curtains and blinds. Dust fan blades and switch the direction they rotate in preparation for winter.

Although these are the things that I often put off in favor of spending time with my family, it's a good idea to do them a couple times a year to improve the air quality in your home, check for damage that you might not otherwise notice and keep it from building up indefinitely.

For simple deep cleaning, stick to a microfiber cloth for dusting, a vinegar/water solution for windows, glass, bathrooms and more and baking soda to scrub sinks, toilets and showers.

## **Maintain**

I often get asked how we keep our home neat with four little ones. The key is that we literally clean up every single night before bed. We put things back where they belong, wipe down the counters and vacuum/mop any areas that need it. Because we do this as a family, it's relatively painless and means that we wake up with a clean slate every day.

Cleaning and decluttering are not the most glamorous aspects of preparing for Christmas, but by getting them out of the way early, you'll leave plenty of time for the stuff you truly enjoy!

**Action Steps:** Print out these [Cleaning Checklists](#) and work through your home room by room before the holiday season hits so that you have more time for family and fun once it gets here.

## Decorating for the Holidays

Ideally, you should complete a Christmas decor inventory as you're packing up your Christmas decorations, with a list of items that you'd like to buy for the next year so that you can begin scouring the after-Christmas sales when decor is marked down by 75 to 90%.

But if you didn't do that (and I haven't always done it either!), then use the [Christmas Décor Inventory printable](#) to think through what you have and what you need to buy this year so that you'll have everything you need when you begin to decorate. One year we pulled out our decorations and couldn't find ornament hangers anywhere and had to wait several days to actually put our ornaments up (remember, we live in the boonies), and that was very disappointing!

As a side note, just because something is on the Decor Inventory list doesn't mean that you need to buy it. We don't have Christmas tableware, and I'm okay with that, but I wanted to include it for those of you who do.

## Unpacking the Decorations

When it's time to unpack your decorations, be sure to do it in a way that makes decorating now and packing up after Christmas easier.

- We usually start by unpacking everything onto our counters (it used to be the floor, but 4 little ones have changed that!) so that we can see what we have before we start making decisions about how to decorate.
- Fix or throw away any broken decorations.
- Make notes about anything you need — or want — to buy.
- Don't be afraid to create a giveaway pile for decorations that you aren't going to use. You may have a few sentimental pieces that you're not using but want to keep, but try to keep those to a minimum. Use it or lose it.
- Keep all of your packing paper — or in my case, [plastic grocery bags](#) — together in one place for packing up your decorations at the end of the season. Make a note of any additional packing materials you'll need.

Taking a few extra minutes to organize things as you're unpacking your decorations makes the dreaded task of packing them back up a little bit easier!

**Action Steps:** Fill out the [Christmas Décor Inventory printable](#) to the best of your memory, making notes about anything you need to buy before you start decorating.



## Holiday Baking You Enjoy

Holiday baking is yet another aspect of Christmas that I love. I'm not a great cook, but I make some pretty yummy baked goods, and I love to make cookies, chocolate-dipped pretzels and other treats for friends, families, neighbors, etc. What my baking lacks in creativity and adorableness, it usually makes up for in taste (I say usually because there is the fact that I ruined all three pies I contributed to Thanksgiving dinner one year...).

One of the great things about holiday baking is how much of it can be done ahead of time. Most cookies freeze well, meaning you can start now — before holiday plans begin to fill up your days and weekends — and have yummy, homemade cookies throughout the season.

### Planning Your Holiday Baking

Now is a great time to begin planning all of your holiday baking because manufacturers are putting out more coupons on baking ingredients and stores are putting these same items on sale. You could stock up on common ingredients without planning ahead, of course, but you can make the most of sales without overbuying by taking a few minutes to plan first.

To start, look at your gift list. Who are you planning to bake for? Do you have an idea of what you plan to bake or do you need to start looking for recipes and ideas? Have you decided how you will package any cookies/candy you make (which will help you estimate the quantity for each as well)?

Begin filling out your [Christmas Baking Planner](#), noting any ingredients or other supplies you'll need to get. Once you have a basic plan in place, add your baking to your [Christmas Calendar](#). You may decide to set aside a whole weekend to do all of your baking or to spread it out over several weeks. Either way, make sure it's all on the calendar.

### Tips for Holiday Baking

Here are a few more tips to help you simplify your holiday baking:

- **Check your supplies.** Double check that you have all of the ingredients for each recipe — and in the quantities you need — before you start. Surely I'm not the only one who has gotten halfway through a recipe only to realize someone has used up half of the eggs and now I don't have enough!
- **Use parchment paper.** If you're making a lot of cookies at once, line your cookie sheets with parchment paper so you can quickly slide the cookies off and put a new batch in the oven.
- **Make a game plan for your baking days.** Look at prep times, bake times, etc. For example, Shaina from [Food for My Family](#) suggests making dough that needs to chill first so that you can work on other cookies while it chills. She also suggests starting

with the cookies that bake at the lowest temperature so that you can increase the temperature in your oven as you go rather than having to wait on it to cool down.

- **Clean up as you go.** As Shaina says, it's much easier to clean up gooey messes than to wait until they're hard and crusty!" Aimee from [Simple Bites](#) has shared her "[clean as you go](#)" method on Simple Mom as well.
- **Prepare your packaging ahead of time.** Shaina also suggests packing your cookies for delivery right away rather than storing them in larger containers and having to divide them up later.

**Action Steps:** Begin filling out your [Christmas Baking Planner](#). Print out or gather any recipes you need and store them in a sheet protector in your [home management notebook](#). Make a shopping list of the ingredients you need to buy.

## Decluttering the Toy Room

One of the hardest parts of Christmas for me is dealing with the aftermath – not just taking down decorations but finding a place for all of the new stuff, most notably all of the new toys my girls get.

A few years ago, they received over 75 presents. Yes, 75. It was ridiculous in the truest sense of the word, and while I know that each person who gave them a gift did so out of love, with 9 sets of grandparents and great-grandparents, it was just too much. As hard as it was, we had to set limits on the number of gifts. You know you've reached the point of ridiculousness when you have to plead with your children to finish opening their presents, and that's exactly what happened. Now that we have four, we needed to get control of the problem sooner rather than later, and our parents and grandparents were all very understanding!

However, just setting limits is not enough. We still need to make room for all of the toys and presents they will receive. Rather than waiting until they've opened the new presents and doing it while we're trying to get our house back in order and recover from all the merry-making, I include time in my Christmas plan to declutter the toy room ahead of time.

We try to follow the ["one toy in, one toy out" rule](#), and I always give preference to toy sets rather than individual little knick knacks. I could easily turn into a scrooge about the whole thing — as my husband often reminds me — so we let them each keep a small bag of special toys for themselves as well. This bag is often filled with McDonald's toys and other random items, the type of thing I purge from the main toy room.

## Purging the Toy Room

So where do you begin when it's time to purge? Here are five steps to help you get started:

- Throw away any broken toys or sets and games with a significant number of missing pieces.
- Give away toys that your children have outgrown.
- Limit the number of items in any given set to what can fit in a single container. The size of the container will vary depending on the item (stuffed animals versus matchbox cars, for example), but pick a container that seems reasonable and then let it be your guide.
- Have your child choose 3 toys to give away to someone in need. I'm a huge proponent of involving my kids in this process, both so they can learn charity and so they can practice organizing and decluttering from a young age.
- Choose toys that inspire the imagination, such as wooden building blocks or dress-up clothes, over more limiting toys, such as a jack-in-the-box.

## Making Gift Lists

To proactively deal with toy clutter, try making gift lists ahead of time for each of your children so that when someone asks you for an idea, you're ready with ideas that you can feel good about.

Another option to consider is non-toy gifts, such as college savings or extracurricular activities. Megan from [Sorta Crunchy](#) shared [10 Clutter-Free Gift Ideas for Kids](#) at Simple Mom, and there are some great options for grandparents on the list.

The key, if you haven't already guessed, is to make a plan ahead of time for how you want to handle gifts so that you don't wake up on Christmas morning to 75 presents under the tree!

**Action Steps:** Begin making a list of gift ideas for each of your children using the [Christmas Gift Ideas printable](#). Mark a date on your calendar to declutter the toy room.

## Charity and Volunteering

One of the best ways to keep from getting caught up in the commercialization of Christmas is to give to others in need. It's easy to start out with the best of intentions to keep your focus on the "reason for the season" and not get caught up in the hubbub of the holidays. But it's just as easy to get to the end of the season and look back only to realize you've let those intentions slip through your fingers without following through.

How can you keep that from happening? Yep, you guessed it. By creating a plan ahead of time so that you have a time and money set aside to invest in the charities and causes that are important to your family.

Really, the opportunities are endless, from volunteering in a local soup kitchen to participating in a worldwide campaign such as [Operation Christmas Child](#). Whether you have a lot or just a little to give, charity and volunteering are a great way to focus on what really matters.

## Getting Children Involved

While it'd be easy enough to just write a check to any number of organizations, it's important to my husband and I that we also teach our children about charity. We've never tried to shield them from the facts of poverty and disease. Of course, we don't share all of the details with them, but we want them to know how blessed we are and to have a heart for people who are less fortunate than us.

We don't want charity to just be something that mom and dad do, and so we encourage them to choose toys to donate, to spend time helping us with family service project-type activities and to even donate money from their allowance to help other people.

Here are some more tips for getting children involved:

- Choose projects that help them connect with a person or family and see the impact of their donation. Whether it's filling a bag with food for a holiday meal, Christmas shopping for a family in need or filling boxes for Operation Christmas Child, putting together a donation of items is much more tangible for a child than just watching you write a check.
- Look for opportunities that involve the giving of time *and* money. Both are important, and there are times in all of our lives when we have more of one or the other to give. But it's also important to show children the rewards that come from both so that they don't get stuck in the rut of just donating money without having to give any of their time or volunteering without having to give something more tangible.
- Encourage your child to make sacrifices. Our church runs a campaign to fill bags with meals for families in the community during the holiday season. One year, we picked

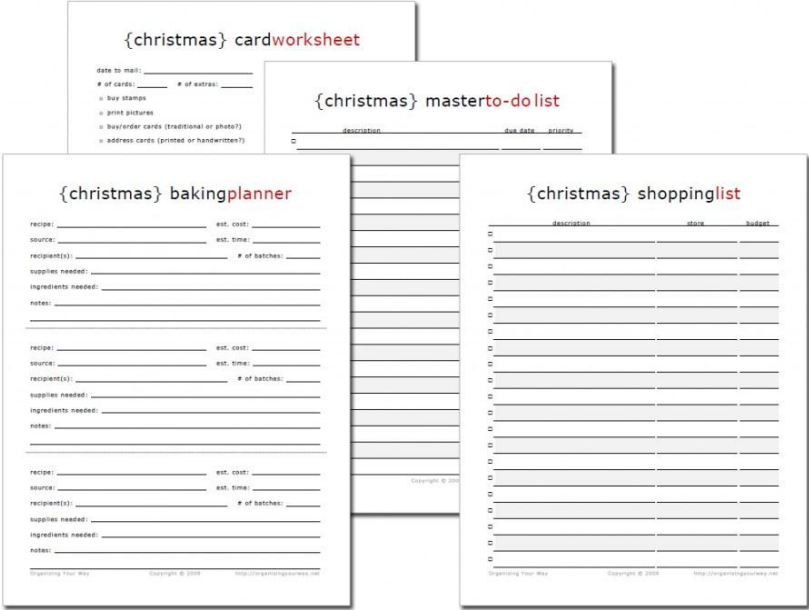
up two bags to fill and then offered our two oldest daughters (3 and 5 years old) a choice. We told them that we would pay to fill one bag, or they could donate a portion of their allowances to help and each fill their own bag for a family who didn't have a holiday dinner.

The truth is that we don't need the few dollars that each of them has saved, but we want them to be willing to make sacrifices to help others. This was a tough decision for our oldest daughter, who looks forward to going shopping with her allowance. But in the end she decided that she would have opportunities to earn more, and in the end, she really enjoyed the process of decorating the bag, shopping for food and writing a note to the family that received it.

- Let them see you making sacrifices. Of course, it's just as important that our kids see that we're willing to make sacrifices as well. We try to be open about our finances with our kids (again, on an age-appropriate level), and we let them see when we sacrifice something we want in order to donate to a cause that's important to us.
- Volunteer together. Children love spending time with their parents, and volunteering together is no exception. Make family memories centered around giving and volunteering so that charity becomes something they look forward to rather than dread.

**Action Steps:** Think through the opportunities you have for giving and volunteering this Christmas season. Which are most important to you? Put them on your [Christmas Calendar](#) and [Christmas Budget](#) so that they don't get pushed aside in the busyness of the season!

# Printable Christmas Planner



Organize all of your Christmas plans in one place with these free printables:

- [Address Book](#)
- [Baking Planner](#)
- [Black Friday Shopping List](#)
- [Blank Calendar](#)
- [Budget Worksheet](#)
- [Cards Worksheet](#)
- [Christmas Prep Calendar](#)
- [Christmas Checklist](#)
- [Cleaning Checklists](#)
- [Décor Inventory](#)

- [Décor Storage](#)
- [Décor Inventory with Storage](#)
- [Family Traditions](#)
- [Gift Ideas](#)
- [Gift List](#)
- [Handmade Gifts](#)
- [Master To-Do-List](#)
- [Order Tracking](#)
- [Shopping List](#)
- [Thank You Cards List](#)



## About



Ten years ago I married the boy who lived across the street.

We set off on a cross-country adventure, moving 3,000 miles away from our family to a city where we knew no one. We made a lot of stupid decisions and did a lot of growing up, and two years later our oldest daughter was born. In the five years that followed, we had three more babies, moved three times and built our dream home on a little slice of heaven in the middle of wild, wonderful West Virginia. We made a few more mistakes, and our hearts broke as we said goodbye to three babies we never got to hold in our arms.

These days, my husband has the privilege of being a stay-at-home dad, and I have the incredible privilege of pursuing my passion — blogging, running a network and more — while also being home for all of the milestones I wouldn't want to miss and the booboos that need kissing. We're a homeschooling family, which means we get to spend every day together. And most days we consider that a blessing!

Through it all, we're just a family trying to make the best decisions we can while pursuing our passions and enjoying each other.

### **About Life Your Way**

I started blogging in 2004 before our oldest daughter was born, and in December of 2009, I launched *Organizing Your Way*, a blog dedicated to helping readers discover organizing solutions that fit their personalities and lifestyle. Two years later we expanded to become [Life Your Way](#) as it is today.

The goal of *Life Your Way* is to inspire our readers to live intentional and creative lives through information, tutorials, recipes, inspiration and more.

Join us as we talk about home, tech, work, green living, DIY projects, money, food and family!

### **About Jungle Deals & Steals**

In July of 2011, my mom and I partnered to launch a blog around one of our very favorite topics – finding deals on Amazon.com. From books, music and toys to toilet paper, snacks and beans, you can find pretty much anything on Amazon, often for less than your local Wal-Mart.

At [Jungle Deals and Steals](#), we share the best Amazon deals with you every day!