

# FAMILY CELEBRATIONS

*A More Fun, Less Stuff Guide  
to Life's Joyful Events*

# Introduction

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**Human connection.** That's what holiday parties, baby showers, birthday parties—any type of celebration, really—boils down to. Think about weddings: it would be a lot less work and cost if a wedding consisted solely of a ceremony. No need to provide a meal or coordinate entertainment. No need to think about seating arrangements or table decorations. Yet despite the hassle, most of us still choose to honor the start of a marriage with a celebration.

**Why? *Because we are hardwired for connection.***<sup>1</sup>

Connection is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. And connection is what we crave when we celebrate our momentous occasions. We want friends and family close by when we get married or have a baby or graduate from college. We want them to share in our joy and support us with their presence.

Yet frequently, the desire for human connection isn't what comes to mind when we think of the typical celebration. From baby showers to sweet sixteens to bar mitzvahs, extravagant events seem to have become a cultural expectation. Just go to Pinterest and check out the most popular celebration "pins": elaborate centerpieces, over-the-top favors, and expensive entertainment ideas.

From a [camping-themed first birthday party with a three-tiered cake](#) to a [boho baby shower with a teepee](#), pervasive messaging reinforces the myth that a celebration must be showy and expensive in order to be beautiful and memorable. Not surprisingly, the average cost of hosting celebrations in the United States is rising steadily.<sup>2</sup>



# How to Use This Guide

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This celebration guide is designed to serve as a practical resource regardless of whether you're planning a holiday gathering, baby shower, birthday party, community potluck, graduation picnic, or backyard barbecue.

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The main aims of this guide are to:  
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- 1** Provide options for those who want to **prioritize connection over consumption** and to plan special celebrations that reflect their lifestyle, promote their values, and enhance their lives.
- 2** Provide a blueprint for those who view their celebration not as an opportunity to impress, but as an opportunity to **strengthen relationships with friends and family** and to encourage a refreshing new way to celebrate.
- 3** Offer inspiration and tips for those who want to host more **environmentally friendly** celebrations, as well as those who are looking to **reduce costs and simplify**.
- 4** Inspire those who want to **joyfully connect with their neighbors and community** without all the cost and unnecessary "stuff."



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## YEAR-END HOLIDAYS

*"If you want your children to turn out well,  
spend twice as much time with them,  
and half as much money."*

— Abigail Van Buren

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hannukkah, Kwanzaa, Winter Solstice, and more, all in a 30-day period. The year-end holidays—meant to be times of peace, reflection, and celebration—too often exhaust us rather than uplift us. Rather than bringing joy and meaning, the “celebrations” feel more like an onslaught of shopping, spending, and frenzied preparations. But it doesn’t have to be this way.

# Our Favorite Holiday Tips

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Whatever you celebrate, you can design a holiday season focused on connection over consumption. It's a matter of prioritizing more of what matters—things like sharing, laughter, and rest—and less of what doesn't—stress, waste, and debt. Below are our favorite simplifying tips to help you design a restful, yet joyful, holiday season.

## 1

### Set Your Intentions

Take a few minutes to think through what you want out of the holidays this year. Does your usual celebration focus on the aspects you feel are most important? Are there traditions you've let lapse that you would love to bring back? What parts of the celebration would be easiest to change, so you can spend time on more of what matters?

With your family, write down the top five holiday events, activities, or traditions that are most meaningful to you. You can then use this list as the filter through which you make decisions about which traditions to keep and which to lose. (For example, if nobody in your family cares about the holiday lights in the yard, don't bother putting them up.) If you find this exercise challenging, take our ["Big Picture" Quiz](#) to help determine what matters most to your family and what doesn't.

## 2

### Leave a Margin

Part of what makes the holidays so challenging is that there's so much fun to be had! Treasured holiday movies, get togethers with loved ones, meaningful service projects, adorable holiday crafts, the list goes on. But you have to leave yourself breathing room if you want a sane holiday season that doesn't make you feel like you're spinning out of control.

As the season starts, don't cram your calendar. Leave plenty of white space so that you can accept that last-minute invitation for hot chocolate with your neighbors. This is where your list of priorities can become a life saver. If an event isn't a family favorite, think carefully about whether it should make it onto your calendar. Try to envision how you and your family will feel on the day of the event—would you be excited or resentful about going?



For additional resources, check out our [Simplify the Holidays](#) campaign.

## 3

### Go Paperless

This year, skip the holiday cards. No more searching for the perfect photo. No more licking envelopes and writing out hundreds of addresses. Think of all the time and money you'll save! With social media connecting us with loved ones far away, the holiday card doesn't seem as necessary to keep relationships alive.

If you want, you can still send an email to folks on your list, explaining that you're foregoing cards this year but that you hope their holiday is joyful and bright. You can post a similar message on social media. There are also plenty of beautiful paperless options these days. Or, you can host a [holiday card swap party](#) with friends and make upcycled cards while having a merry time.

## 4

### Use What You Have

When it comes to decor, adopt the "less is more" attitude. That way, your favorites really shine and you don't spend countless hours shopping for, putting up, and taking down decorations. Commit to not buying any new decorations this year—instead, use what you have or bring the outdoors in. Check out our [Simplify the Holidays Pinterest board](#) for simple ways you can use what you have to deck out your home for the holidays.

## 5

### Cancel "The Show"

Author Brené Brown [recounts](#) a terrible Christmas memory that she uses to help her focus on more of what matters during the holidays. She was sitting in her kitchen, addressing 225 Christmas cards, while her son was crying in his room because she wouldn't read him "the reindeer book" until she finished the cards. Her daughter was sulking in the living room because it was too late to start a *Polar Express* family movie night.

Eventually, Brené exploded and yelled: "I HAVE to finish these cards!... Everyone wants to send them, but I'm the one who has to make it happen!" When the house got very quiet, she remembers telling herself: "Oh, well. The show must go on."

After that incident, Brené began to realize that, when our lives become pageants, we become actors. And when we become actors, we sacrifice authenticity. Without authenticity, we can't cultivate love and connection. Without love and connection, we have nothing.

This year, cancel the show. That doesn't mean cancel the holiday. It just means thinking about the various roles you play. Which ones are authentic and bring you joy? If you don't enjoy hosting an extravagant meal and only do it because your extended family expects you to play the part, why not just cancel the show and invite them for dessert instead? Or host a hot chocolate and movie party. Maybe just invite your loved ones to meet you at an ice skating rink. Or organize a group service project. Or, don't host a gathering at all. Repeat to yourself: The show does not have to go on.





## 6

### **Our Top Tip: Skip the Stores This Year!**

For many of us, overspending is the biggest source of holiday stress. Even when money isn't a concern, holiday shopping can still be stressful. Meanwhile, all of the time spent shopping replaces time you could be using to connect with loved ones. This year, commit to skipping the stores—brick-and-mortar as well as online.

Before you start panicking, keep in mind that we're not asking you to eliminate gift giving altogether. While a no-gift policy may work for some families, most of us feel uncomfortable showing up empty-handed to celebrations.

Why do we feel such pressure to gift? Is it simply our culture that makes us feel obligated? In [\*The 5 Love Languages\*](#), Gary Chapman views it differently. After researching love and marriage in cultures around the world, he finds that, in every culture he studied, gift giving seems to be a "fundamental expression of love that transcends cultural barriers."

However, the idea that *we can only express our love by giving expensive material items* almost certainly reflects cultural pressure. To free yourself from this notion, we recommend thinking outside the box and giving in a manner that prioritizes "more fun and less stuff."

This year, emphasize connecting with your loved ones over buying more stuff. Consider, for example, giving gifts of time and skill. Do you play guitar? Offer a few beginner lessons to your child or spouse. Love to entertain? Help a party-shy friend plan a fun event. Can't think of any "special skills"? You can always dog walk, shovel snow, or babysit.

You can also consider gifts of experience. From museum memberships to concert tickets to restaurant gift cards, you can give your loved ones a wonderful memory. Even better, make it a date and join them!

For hundreds of meaningful gift ideas, download our alternative gift catalog, the [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#). You'll find wonderful ideas for everyone on your list. And for those of you who want to give meaningful gifts but don't want to show up empty-handed, print out our fully customizable [coupon book](#), where you can apply endless creativity in your gifting.



**Get ideas for gifts of quality time and experience in our [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#).**

# Want to Add a Fun Twist to Gift Giving?

## Create a “GiveList” on SoKind Registry

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If you're unsure about what kind of “meaningful gift” your loved one would enjoy, why not add a fun twist and let them actually choose?

Through New Dream's [SoKind registry](#), you can create a GiveList of all the gifts you're happy to offer this year. A GiveList flips a traditional registry on its head and allows you to compile a list of unique and creative gifts that you're willing to give to others.

Is there a local artist you'd like to support? Put one of her pieces on your GiveList. Are there organizations that you'd love to help this year?

Add them to your GiveList and, if a loved one chooses that gift, make a donation in his name. Want a mountain biking buddy? Who knows— maybe Grandma will surprise you.

Once you've compiled a list of gifts, simply share the link to your GiveList, and your loved ones can choose the gifts that they'd most like to receive. Need inspiration? Check out this [sample GiveList](#) for ideas.



It's never too early to learn the importance of giving! Our [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#) has an entire section devoted to ideas for gifts that kids can give to others.



# How to Ask for the Gifts You Really Want This Holiday Season

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For many of us, gift giving isn't nearly as big a challenge as the gifts we receive. Is it really good for our kids to receive so much every year? What about all the waste created in producing the toys and trinkets—many of them made from cheap, nondurable plastic. And the clutter... don't even get us started on that!

How can we communicate these concerns to loved ones while still demonstrating that we appreciate the time and effort that goes into gift giving? One approach is to model the kind of gift giving you would appreciate: if you don't want your kids to receive junky toys, don't give junky toys!

If you want to be more direct in asking for what you want, you can create a detailed holiday wish list through [SoKind registry](#). Would you prefer babysitting hours to the latest kitchen gadget? Put it on your list. Have too many sweaters? Ask people to spend a day with you volunteering at your favorite charity instead. SoKind lets you register for anything from homemade gifts and secondhand goods to charitable donations and experiences—as well as more traditional gifts.

**If you feel uneasy about being the first to push out a holiday wish list to your circle, try proposing it like this:**

*"This year, I really want to make sure that I'm giving gifts you want. I don't just want to add clutter! I heard about this service called [SoKind](#) that lets families make holiday wish lists. You can think creatively and register for gifts that you can't get in a store. Here's a [sample wish list](#) to look at. Wouldn't it be fun if our families each created one this year?"*

**For a GiveList, maybe try something like this:**

*"This year, I really want to make sure that I'm giving gifts you really want. I don't just want to add clutter! I heard about this service called [SoKind](#) that lets families make holiday GiveLists and wish lists. I'd love to do something like this. Here is a [sample GiveList](#) to look at. Wouldn't it be fun if our families created these this year?"*

Or, create just the GiveList and see if anybody asks about a wish list. If they do, be sure to have one ready to share!

## Amy's Story



Staring into the closet where I stored the Christmas gifts I had bought for my young daughter, I felt overwhelmed and even a bit disgusted. I looked at the mountain of gifts and considered her playroom, already bursting with playthings. Could this excess be good for her?

What relationship between love and material possessions was I modeling for my child? With so many toys, would any particular one ever become cherished and [Velveteen Rabbit-real](#) for her? Could I impart the importance of creativity, frugality, and experiences over material goods with this heap of stuff?

My discomfort led me to some favorite resources, including [New Dream's website](#). I began to ponder the messages being sent by the gifts my family gives. In years past, we had tried to avoid the mall or big-box retailers and to focus instead on free trade, artisan, and handmade goods. But ultimately, these were still material goods. Most importantly, they didn't provide the gift most of us want the most: love and time.

I realized I could simply give my time and talents to family and friends. Our [holiday coupon book](#) gift was born:

- One of my friends had been wanting to learn how to can her own food, and, fortunately, I'm an avid canner. To her, I **gifted lessons in water bath canning**. When she redeemed the coupon, we made jams, marmalade, and other fruit preserves together.
- Another friend frequently took weekend trips and left her dog under the care of a critter sitter. I **gifted my pet care services to her family**, knowing that it would not only help her save money, but also provide the comfort of no longer having a stranger come to her house.



- My gift list also included a fellow homeschooling mother, who was busy with many young children and often overwhelmed with her domestic tasks. I **gifted her "an extra set of hands,"** meaning "call me at a moment when you are struggling and I can do whatever you need: watch the children, help with chores, pick something up at the store, etc."

The [coupon book](#) was the ideal solution for finding more nourishing gifts for my daughter. Her first book had 10 coupons: 5 each from me and my husband. Among her gifts: 2 coupons for "screen-free parents" weekend, 1 restaurant dinner of your choice, 1 s'mores making & ghost story reading bonfire, 1 hike at a state park of her choosing, and 1 geocaching Saturday afternoon at a destination of her choice. These gifts didn't just provide time and experiences but also the power of choice, which I know my daughter enjoys.

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*"Toys don't make an occasion special  
—the people and experiences do."*  
.....

As for the closetful of new toys, I donated over half, knowing that other children would appreciate them. The others I used as an emergency stash for birthday parties. With her stack of new books, a beautiful horse stable made by Daddy, and the [coupon book](#), my daughter was more than content at Christmas, proving to me just how misguided I had been to have acquired so many toys.

—Amy



# BIRTHDAYS

*"Birthdays are good for you.  
Statistics show that the people who  
have the most live the longest."*

— Bill Murray



Birthday parties have certainly changed in the last couple of decades. In many communities, they've shifted from small home-based get togethers to catered parties with entertainment and lavish goody bags, leaving parents trapped in the hyped-up party circuit. And wait until your child hits the teen years: sweet sixteens and quinceañeras can rival weddings in their extravagance and costs!

# Aren't "happy" birthdays enough?

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What's going on here? Some academics surmise that today's parents are simply trying to re-live (read: improve on) their own childhoods. Sociologists would argue that people are displaying their social status to one another. And maybe this explains some people's behavior—but not everyone's.

In her book [Overwhelmed](#), Brigid Schulte reveals that throwing her daughter an over-the-top Greek Goddess party, complete with Ionic columns in the backyard, was not about recapturing her youth or keeping up with the Joneses. Rather, it was like "proving to whoever was watching that I, too, was a good mother, even if I worked, wearing these birthday parties like the proud peacock feathers of mother love."

Bill Doherty, the director of [Birthdays Without Pressure](#) at the University of Minnesota, explains that today's generation of psychologically minded, middle-class parents is highly focused on their children's self-esteem and personal development. While this generally is a good thing, when paired with this generation's anxiety for their children, it leads parents to an "anxious preoccupation with every opportunity for their children to feel good about themselves, to learn, and to be enriched—and to worry that they, the parents, are not doing enough."

Doherty notes that, in this "peer culture of parenting, it feels as if the more carefully scheduled the party, the more care has been put into it. And who wants to send the message that you care less about your child?" Moreover, there's a lack of trust that children will find a way to simply play, and a lack of understanding that play itself is enriching for children.

But it doesn't have to be this way when planning your child's next party (or yours, for that matter!).



# 7 Tips for a Simpler, Less Stressful Kids' Party



## 1

### Pay Attention to Joy, Not Comparison

Christine Koh, co-author of *Minimalist Parenting: Enjoy Modern Family Life More by Doing Less*, reminds us that we'll be happier if **we pay attention to our children's joy**, rather than to the fact that Liam had a petting zoo at his party and Madison took 20 girls to a Katy Perry concert.

A big part of knowing what is appropriate is tuning in to your child's temperament. Maybe your child gets overwhelmed easily and would most enjoy a party with three or four friends doing a quiet art project together. Even though everyone else invited the entire class to their parties—and you worry about seeming rude for not returning the favor—remind yourself just to focus on your child's joy. (To get your kids on board, see tip #7!)

## 2

### Set Limits

**Limit the number of participants.** A good rule of thumb is to invite the same number of guests as your child's age. If, knowing your child's temperament, even that number is too much, offer your child a special treat with one or two friends instead of a party. You can also limit how often you host a big party. Maybe you host a "friend party" every other year, and in the off years, you have a simple family party.

**Limit gift giving.** One New Dream staffer has a deal with her kids: if they want a party with several friends, they have to forego gifts and collect for their favorite charity. The kids choose the charity—so far, they’ve collected supplies for local schools and animal shelters, blankets for [Project Night Night](#), and books for a local children’s hospital.

Because the kids get to choose whether to have a small family party with gifts or a larger party with donations, they’ve never complained (yet!). And they always feel proud when making the post-party delivery to the charity they’ve chosen. By asking for a donation rather than a gift, it makes it easier for other families to avoid the awkwardness of showing up empty-handed.

If friends and family members really want to give your child a gift, start a [SoKind registry](#) and register for gifts that add more fun and less stuff to your lives.

**For older children,** a fun option is a White Elephant party, where each guest brings an age-appropriate book in lieu of a gift. The children draw numbers and select a book out of the bag in order of their numbers. When it’s their turn to choose, they can either keep their book or choose from someone who’s already gone. The kids will have tons of fun, and the birthday child will probably be just fine without a huge stack of presents.

**For younger kids** (who may get upset if someone “takes” the book they’ve chosen), try a simple book swap, where each child brings one book and chooses another to bring home.

**Limit your attendance.** Your kids don’t have to go to every party they’re invited to. It’s perfectly acceptable (and, for many of us, key to our sanity!) to say no on occasion in favor of family time.



### 3

## Create Rituals

Creating rituals is good for so many reasons. First, it removes much of the decision making. If, every year, you celebrate birthdays with a special family dinner and an outing with two of your kids’ closest friends, you’re pretty much set. Second, creating rituals imbues the activity with meaning. Rather than buying disposable decorations, [create a family heirloom](#) instead. Cut down a bedsheet to fit your table. If you’re feeling crafty, add a fun patterned border. Then, at every celebration, have each guest sign their name in permanent marker and include a message. You’ve just created a lovely record of your child’s birthday celebrations that can be used year after year.

Some families do a birthday photo banner. Simply print out a good picture from the previous year, stick it on a bright piece of paper, and add it to the banner. If you’re not the crafty type, you can buy a reusable cloth banner and pull it out every year on the family member’s birthday. Voila! You’ve got a family heirloom.

## 4

### Use What You Have

If your daughter has a beautiful tea set, have her host a doll tea party for her birthday. We heard of a party where the daughter was a huge Harry Potter fan, so she used a lot of her own collection to decorate. The highlight of the party was when each guest was “sorted” into her Hogwarts house: in lieu of the magical sorting hat, her dad was upstairs on one phone, reading the Sorting lines from the book, while the girls listened downstairs on speaker phone. It took two minutes of planning, and the kids thought it was magical.

Another idea is to use your child’s artwork for decorations. Imagine how proud they’ll feel to have their artwork displayed all over the house when friends and family come over!

## 6

### Skip the Extras

Often, it feels like there’s an unwritten rule that you must serve a meal at a party. But you can choose to ignore this “rule.” Simply schedule the party between lunch and dinner, and serve a small selection of snacks and drinks plus cake.

And oh, the goody bags! How many plastic rings and rubber balls can one child own? Wouldn’t it be great if parents pledged to just stop with the goody bags? If you want to send guests home with a thoughtful token, one idea is to give each kid a \$5 gift card to the local ice cream shop. (When you add up the cost of the trinkets and bags, it’s often more than \$5 per kid.) Or how about the “double duty” favor: host a craft party, and the craft is the favor. Or have a cookie-decorating party, where the children get to keep their beautiful creations.

## 5

### Team Up!

If your child has a friend or classmate with a birthday in the same month, why not team up and share the responsibilities? One family could host and be in charge of the food, and the other family could come up with some fun games and crafts.

## 7

### Get Your Kids on Board

If you’ve always thrown big parties for your kids and want to make a change, Bill Doherty advises parents to start with a family conversation about what you most value about celebrations—with every family member getting a voice. Then, introduce your desire to go for depth and quality rather than numbers and spectacle. Emphasize that you want your child to have fun, and offer options that have fewer guests and more personal connection. You can even try this as an experiment for the first year, then go from there.





# BABY SHOWERS

*"Babies are such a nice way to start people."*

— Don Herrold

Across cultures, the practice of celebrating pregnancy and childbirth is ancient and enduring. But it's only after World War II that the baby shower as we know it today—with its emphasis on giving material gifts—evolved.<sup>3</sup>



# It Takes A Village (Or A Small Fortune)

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In previous eras, baby celebrations served as an initiation into a new state of being: motherhood. But today, the baby shower focuses on ensuring that the expectant parents receive all the products for which they've registered. And while the baby shower culture is not nearly as extravagant as the wedding scene, it's moving in that direction.

Recent trends include the addition of baby "sprinkles" for parents who already have one child as well as "gender reveal" events (which usually are on the new parents' tab!).

Meanwhile, one thing that most new parents do not need is more expenses. In the United States, families can now expect to spend between \$12,350 and nearly \$14,000 annually, on average, to raise a child.<sup>5</sup>

According to Alan Fields, co-author of [\*Baby Bargains\*](#), new parents typically pay nearly \$6,000 to buy all the accoutrements of baby life. But, in truth, the average family ought to be able to get the job done for at least \$2,000 less. If parents are willing to share, borrow, and buy secondhand items, that figure would drop even further.

In addition to the heavy spending, parents often register for plastic and other items that may pose a risk to the health of the child and the environment.

The reality is, what you need most when you have a baby is the gift of time and community. Those cute socks shaped like ballet slippers may be fun to unwrap at your shower, but it's the pre-made, homecooked meals and babysitting hours that will keep you sane once the baby is born!



# 5 Tips for a Meaningful Baby Shower

## 1

### Register for Gifts of Sanity

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when you're pregnant, especially with your first child. There are so many products out there, it's hard to distinguish between what you need and what stores are trying to convince you that you need.

Here's our advice: Talk to some parents who are a few years ahead of you (and preferably with multiple kids) in the parenting game. Unlike parents of newborns who may be sleep deprived and not confident in their choices yet, a parent who's been in the trenches knows the types of gifts that will actually save your sanity down the line.

You'll find that most of the sanity-saving gifts don't come from a store. This is where [SoKind registry](#) comes in. On SoKind, you can register for traditional gifts like car seats and strollers, but also for gifts of time and skill. You can ask for homemade meals, babyproofing help, coffee dates with mom, help decorating the nursery, college fund contributions, house cleaning, laundry, and more—if you can think of it, you can ask for it! Find gift inspiration in our [More Fun Less Stuff Catalog](#) (look at the section for New Parents) and in our [SoKind sample registry](#).



For more alternative gift list ideas, check out New Dream's [SoKind Registry](#).



## 2

### Use What You Have

Who says a baby shower has to be pink or blue from top to bottom? Rather than buy a bunch of teddy bear-themed decorations that you'll never use again, take inventory of what you have and what you can borrow. Between your family and friends, you can probably create a lovely set-up.

If you need a little extra decor, consider these ideas:

**Decorate with the gifts.** Not only does decorating with gifts make for an adorable presentation, it also eliminates the need for wrapping paper! Just be sure to let guests know in advance to skip the wrapping paper. As they arrive, arrange the gifts throughout the party site.

**Use family heirlooms and photos.** Baby photos, favorite stuffed animals, special baby outfits—dig through your families' closets and see if you can find your and your partner's loved baby items. To involve guests in a fun way, ask them to bring favorite photos of them and you as a child.

## 3

### Plan Activities With Long-Term Appeal

When planning baby shower activities, why not have your loved ones create something that will be loved for years to come? Set up some stations, and get creative! [Hand-painted blocks](#) and onesies. [Alphabet books](#). ["I'm Bored" jars](#). Handmade quilts. Kid-approved family recipes. Or skip the games altogether and ask guests to take turns giving their best parenting advice or to tell the story of how they know the mother-to-be.

## 4

### Ditch the Favors

Plastic baby bottles filled with candy. Pink and blue keychains. Pacifier-shaped candles. Personalized baby shower shot glasses (we're not kidding—this is a thing!). Does anybody actually want this stuff? The true gift you're giving friends and family is a lovely time together.

If you want to send guests home with a parting gift, there are plenty of thoughtful options. How about baby-themed cookies, or a small potted plant? Or, if you collected family photos for the decorations, send each guest home with the photo that would mean the most to them.

## 5

### Focus on the Expectant Parents' Needs

As with any celebration, it's crucial to remember that you can always "cancel the show." Instead of worrying about getting everything Pinterest-perfect, think about the type of event that would bring the most joy and support to the parents-to-be. For some, a co-ed backyard BBQ fits the bill. For others, a women-only tea party may be just what makes an expectant mother feel loved.

## Guinevere's Story



I was lucky that three dear friends came together to plan and execute a potluck baby shower on my behalf. All three had lots of experience in helping other women prepare for giving birth and becoming mothers for the first time. So my input largely consisted of crafting the guest list, creating my registry, and identifying any activities that I really wanted to do. They took care of everything else!

The emphasis was on hand-me-down gifts, potluck food, and—most importantly—the sharing of heartfelt blessings and advice, which was the main event of the day. For special activities, I requested that the whole group stand in a tight circle and bind beautiful yarn around our wrists in make-shift bracelets (the idea is to wear the yarn bracelet until the end of the pregnancy and remove it when the baby is born). We also made beeswax candles that each guest could take home and light when they found out that the baby had arrived.

The best part of the event for me was when we all came together to offer a blessing, poem, or words of wisdom. Because it was an eclectic group that included friends, former colleagues, my mother, and my mother-in-law, everyone said a few words about how we met or what our relationship means to them, which was fun and touching—I enjoyed hearing old, funny, and heartfelt stories from the women who know me the best.

But it was more than just fun—the blessings and advice made me feel loved, supported, and confident. And that was hands-down the best gift of the day! Funny enough, many people brought gifts—nearly all of them hand-me-downs, books, and other items that I'd requested on my [SoKind registry](#)—but unlike a typical baby shower focused on opening presents and ooh-ing and

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*"It was fun to get hand-me-downs and to hear the wonderful stories and memories from other mothers about their own little ones."*  
.....

aah-ing at the tiny clothes and new toys, we ran out of time before I could unwrap anything. It was fine with me: I enjoyed going through the gifts with my mom that evening and was grateful that the emphasis of the event was on love, food, and community—not stuff.

It was fun to get hand-me-down items and to hear the wonderful stories and remembrances from other mothers about their own little ones. We also "registered" for friends to come over and walk or play with our dog, since we knew she'd feel neglected once our son was born—this was also a nice, free way for people to catch a quick visit with the baby. At the time, SoKind didn't offer a meal sign-up, but now that it's available, I know we definitely would have used this.

Being surrounded by friends, family, and women who love me and are so happy for me was the best gift and support I could receive in preparation for giving birth and becoming a mother. And I really do believe that their prayers and wisdom were a huge part of the happy, healthy birth of my son.

—Guinevere



# COMMUNITY-BUILDING CELEBRATIONS

*"Show up for collective moments of joy  
and pain so we can actually bear witness  
to inextricable human connection."*

— Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*

Ancient philosophers and contemporary scientists agree that a key (perhaps *the* key) to happiness is relationships. This is precisely why so many of New Dream's resources, including this guide, are aimed at helping people deepen relationships with their loved ones. But we want to take it a step further. We want to encourage you to use celebrations as a way to broaden relationships, not just maintain them.

# 3 Tips for Hosting a Community-Building Celebration

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Most of us surround ourselves with people who think and behave like we do—and there’s clear value in doing so. But it’s also important to move beyond our social circles and to learn from people with varying life experiences and perspectives. Put simply, it would be nice to just know more of our neighbors!

How can we work toward building a tighter-knit community? Communities grow when individuals regularly do simple things together that give them a chance to connect and build trust. Hosting a celebration or event is one perfect way to start laying this foundation.

## 1

### Don’t Invite People In

For many of us, hosting can be stressful. Even if we’re not perfectionists, we care about not looking like slobs—especially if we’re inviting people that we don’t know well into our homes.

Rather than shy away from connecting with neighbors because you lack the time to clean your bathroom, follow Kristin Schell’s lead. Kristin was lamenting the fact that she didn’t have much opportunity to meet her neighbors. So one day, she painted her picnic table turquoise and put it in her front yard. Embarrassed to sit there alone, she brought out some projects she was working on. A while later, a neighbor who lived three doors down (whom Kristin had never spoken with!) walked over and introduced herself.

Kristin then began inviting neighbors, friends, and even strangers to hang out with her at her turquoise picnic table. Before long, Kristin’s turquoise table led to a movement of [Front Yard People](#)—ordinary folks who long to create community right where they live.

It can be as easy as hanging out in your front yard more often. No room for a table? Set up some porch chairs. No front yard? No problem. As Kristin recommends, think about places where people naturally gather in your community. It could be on rooftops or at community centers, at the local playground or in the library common room. Find a place to settle in, and invite others to join you.



## 2

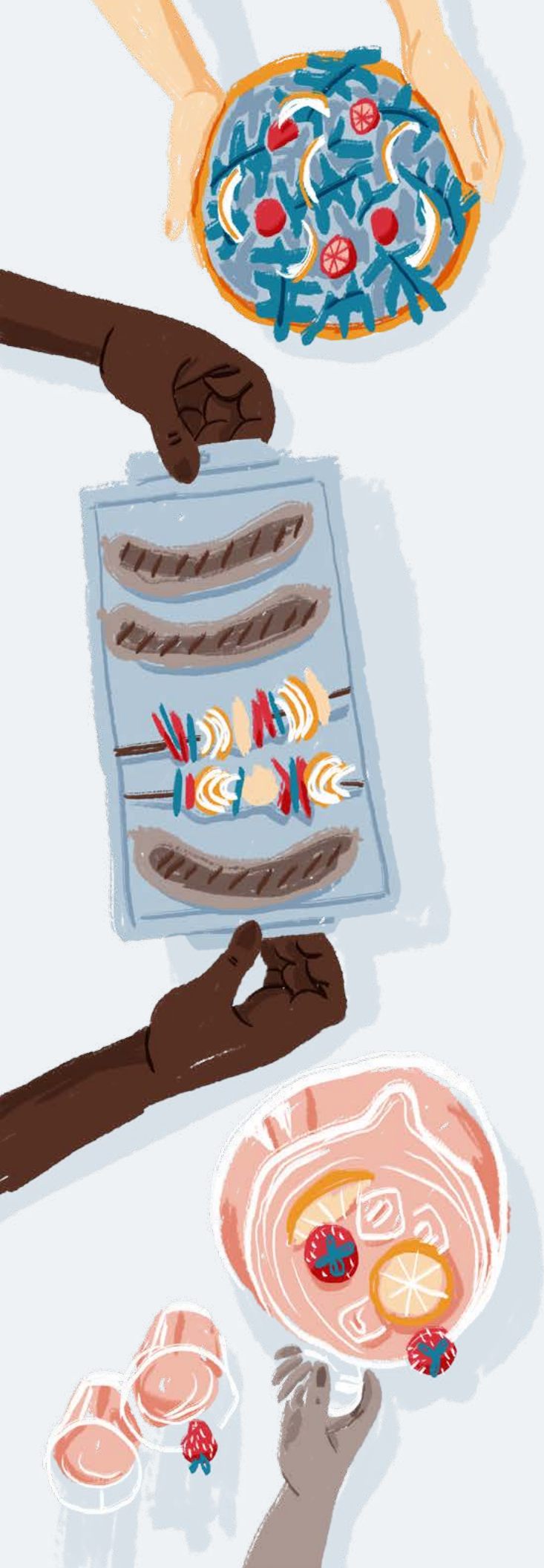
### Set a Community-Building Goal

When [Sarah Harmeyer](#) moved to Dallas, Texas, in 2011, it took her a while to find her footing. She had lost her social circle and filled her time chasing performance goals at work. But before long, Sarah knew that she needed to make a change. She reflected on the moments in her life where she felt most alive, and kept coming back to what she loved most: gathering around a table and celebrating others.

Sarah decided that her word for 2012 would be *community*. But rather than aim for some vague sense of community, she set a specific goal to gather 500 people around her table in 2012, one meal at a time.

Sarah's home was small, so she asked her dad to build her a table with benches to put in her yard. She hosted lunches and dinners and neighborhood concerts. She invited friends and neighbors and strangers. She included "the more, the merrier" on every holiday invitation. And, on Thanksgiving Day 2012, the 500th guest sat at her table. At the start of that year, Sarah had known the names of only 2 neighbors; by the end of the year, she knew over 50.

Sarah's goal forced her to push herself out of her comfort zone. Maybe you're not ready to host 500 guests this year. But you could aim for three neighborhood block parties. Or you could hold a regular monthly gathering. Some neighborhoods host monthly soup socials, where the host provides the soup, and the neighbors bring bread, drinks to share, and their own dinnerware. Host the first one, and see if others want to make it a regular occurrence.





## 3

### Start a Project

Some people find it easier to connect with others through a shared project. If inviting neighbors to your home for a meal or sitting in your front yard doesn't appeal to you, think of an event that you could host that's designed to improve the lives of others in your community. It could be as practical as organizing a neighborhood yard sale or community toy swap. Check out [New Dream's community-building resources](#) for step-by-step guides to organizing these types of events.

You could also coordinate an event around an issue that's impacting your community. In late 2016, Charlottesville's Michelle Damiani—feeling for the refugee families in her community—decided to host a fundraiser for International Neighbors of Charlottesville. She recruited nearly 40 soup-makers and invited all of Charlottesville to join them for supper. She lined up speakers, including five from the refugee community, to share their stories. Local bakeries donated bread, and volunteers made desserts.

Michelle's goal was to host 150 people and raise \$5,000. That would provide driving lessons for 5 adults, music lessons for 15 children, swim lessons for 7 children, dental visits for 25 children, and more. Over 300 people showed up, raising more than \$16,500 for the refugee families.

But they did more than just raise money. As Michelle [describes](#): "We raised awareness for a local organization doing good work.... By including the refugee community in the gathering not only as guests and speakers but also accepting their gracious offers to provide food, we folded them into our community. And by providing an opportunity for people to gather around a simple supper with a simple goal, we reminded our town of how good it feels to connect, embrace, and give."

Not everyone feels comfortable coordinating an event for 300 people. Ultimately, it's not the size of the crowd that matters—what matters to the quality of community life is [the number of people who regularly connect, build trust, and get involved with one another](#).

Find the event or project that allows you to build on your strengths and find your joy. But also remember that, to build true community, we must step outside of our comfort zones and seek to understand those who may not share our values or our life experiences. So sit in your front yard and talk to that neighbor who teases you about your compost bin. Or invite the new family that doesn't speak English to your next potluck. Community grows stronger through the little actions that we take every day.





## Start Connecting!

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Whether you're planning a holiday gathering or a fundraiser, we hope this guide inspires you to connect with more of what matters to you—and less of what doesn't.

Here's to more fun, more love, and more connection!

*Your friends at New Dream*

### References .....

<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Helaine Olen, "Children's birthday parties are getting more and more extravagant. Here's how we let it happen," *Slate*, January 22, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "Ritual and Ceremony: A History of Baby Showers," *RandomHistory.com*, November 1, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Vasel, "It costs \$233,610 to raise a child," *CNN Money*, January 9, 2017.

**New Dream's mission is to empower individuals, communities, and organizations to transform the ways they consume to improve well-being for people and the planet.**

We work with individuals and communities to conserve natural resources, counter the commercialization of our culture, and support community engagement. We seek to change social norms around consumption and consumerism and to support the movement of individuals and communities pursuing lifestyle and community action.

New Dream's overall goal is to change behavior, attitudes, and social norms to reduce consumption and build community. We envision a society that pursues not just "more," but more of what matters—and less of what doesn't.

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Family Celebrations Guide

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