

sweet charity give back together

Instill the spirit of giving in your kids by helping others as a family. Try one (or more) of these volunteer ideas from readers—and you'll all feel warm and fuzzy inside.

by Lindsey Palmer

“Through a program at our church, our family reconditions old bikes, stores them in our garage, and eventually delivers them to less fortunate children. My kids get really excited to think about how much joy a bike they've worked on will bring to another boy or girl.”

—Trish Baizer, 39, Danville, CA

stay-calm holiday secrets

NO, A MELTDOWN IS NOT INEVITABLE—IF YOU STICK WITH THESE STRESS-FREE SOLUTIONS.

Meltdown moment: You and your hubby have a holiday gift-list budget, but he bought his brother a present that's double the price you agreed on.

» **Stay-cool strategy:** Going overboard on one item won't sabotage your whole budget, but making it a habit can drive you into holiday debt faster than you can say, “I'll charge it.” Let your guy know that although you think his gesture was sweet, you'd like to commit as partners to staying on track with spending, says Mary E. Hunt, author of *Debt-Proof Your Holidays*. He doesn't necessarily have to return the gift, but together you should figure out how you can trim down the rest of your list. The next time one of you sees a big-ticket item that you *must* buy, give yourself a full day to think about what you'll have to sacrifice for the purchase and discuss it with your partner, Hunt suggests. Also, if you shop with cash—not credit cards—you'll be less likely to splurge.

Meltdown moment: Your friend's annual cookie swap and your office holiday party fall on the same night—and you can't say no to either.


» **Stay-cool strategy:** If you want to go to your friend's, but you should go to your job's (or vice versa), make a list of the positives and negatives of attending each, then decide which one is truly a must, suggests Anthony Ng, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at The George Washington School of Medicine. You may realize that missing one party isn't as big a deal as you think. “People tend to overestimate the consequences of declining an invitation,” he says. “Sure, the host may be disappointed, but it probably won't cost you that promotion, or break the relationship with your friend.” If it is possible to attend both, let the hosts know in advance that you'll have to leave early or arrive late.

"We buy hats and gloves and drop them off at homeless shelters. We also always remember to buy them for one man in our neighborhood who is less fortunate than us."

—Cynthia Montavon, 47, Berwyn, IL

"My daughter babysits for a single mother's four children, and last year **we sponsored them for Thanksgiving**. We ordered a meal from our grocery store and delivered it to them. They were so grateful, and our family felt great about being able to help them out."

—Christine Tipp, 46, Tualatin, OR

 **Preteens and teens who volunteer at least one hour per week are less likely to be involved in at-risk behaviors—such as drinking and skipping school—than those who don't.**

Source: Search Institute

"We make boxes of cookies and homemade candy to give to all the people who have blessed our lives over the year, even if it was with just a kind word when we were feeling down."

—Darlene Tanti, 41, Cassadaga, NY

"My daughter loves donating money when she sees the **Salvation Army bell ringers** outside of stores. We also donate canned food to the local food bank."

—Cynthia Dockery Allgood, 27, Dalton, GA

"My son and I have gotten involved in **Soldiers' Angels**—we collect hot chocolate, magazines, CDs, and socks, and **send the care packages to the soldiers**. That way, they have something to open on Christmas Day. We also raise money for Pennies for Heroes, which funds packages for the troops. I've set up my own penny collection, plus one at my son's school."

—Lisa Barker, 32, Elk Grove Village, IL

"Every year we make a big Christmas gift basket full of baked goods. Then on Christmas Eve we all go out as a family and **give it to a stranger**—a tollbooth operator, a clerk at the market, someone at the bus stop—anyone who looks like they could use some cheer."

—Darcy Bishop, 40, Beaverton, OR

Meltdown moment: You vowed to limit yourself to three hors d'oeuvres, but you've put away more mini quiches than you can count.

>> Stay-cool strategy: One night of bingeing won't tip the scale—but five consecutive nights could, says Leann Ely, a certified nutritionist and author of *Saving Dinner for the Holidays*. Don't feel guilty about indulging—just don't do it again. You can offset a high-calorie splurge: Exercise an extra 10 minutes, and cut meals in half, she suggests. "We lose our focus around the holidays," Ely says. "The spotlight turns to food, instead of toward enjoying the company of friends and family." Look your cousin in the eye instead of over her shoulder at the mini-hot dog tray. And identify your weaknesses *before* the party: If you can be satisfied after two bites of chocolate cake, then go for it! But if chocolate sets you up for a binge, steer clear of it: choose the tasty-but-not-your-favorite pecan pie instead, which won't tempt you to go back for seconds.

Meltdown moment: Aunt Edna's nagging you about when you'll get pregnant.

>> Stay-cool strategy: Sometimes there's no stopping a meddler, says Dina Koutas Poch, author of *I ♥ My In-Laws*, and it's best to just let her snooping roll off your shoulders. Sure, your aunt's nosiness may be irksome, but accepting that you can't change her personality will save you a lot of frustration and make it easier to not take her comments personally. Instead of answering defensively, try something neutral like, "Bob and I are really happy right now," then deflect conversation to calmer waters, Poch says.

Meltdown moment: You're ushering at your son's holiday concert, organizing the office gift exchange, taking your grandmother shopping, and now your daughter's teacher is calling to see if you'll bake cookies for the class party.

>> Stay-cool strategy: You may think you're embracing the holiday spirit by saying yes to everyone, but spreading yourself too thin will



hang ornaments and simple sentiments on ribbons for your windows. (for more glass ornaments, visit potterybarn.com and westelm.com)

"We pick the name of a **needy child** from our church's Christmas tree, and then we have fun shopping for the requested gift and a few other things that we think the child would enjoy."

—Lorrie Manganaro, 24, South Hamilton, MA

"Last year we dropped by the house of my sister's elderly neighbor and sang Christmas carols. We felt as touched by the experience as the neighbor did."

—Gerri Leder, 51, Baltimore

find the right charity for your family:

* spreadthebread.org

This global grassroots community proposes a simple way to give: Bake a loaf of bread, wrap it up like a present, add a card or note, then give it to a local pantry or to someone you consider a hero.

* onewarmcoat.org

Enlist your children to dig through the attic and round up their old coats, then deliver them to local agencies that distribute them to people in need. Better yet, pile the kids in the car and collect coats from neighbors and friends.


* pets911.com

Make cat toys or bake doggy biscuits for your four-legged friends at a local shelter (find one on the site). Bring them over and spend the day visiting with the animals.

* makeachildsmile.com

Create cards for children with serious illnesses, and for their family members too. Log on to read about the kids' stories and send them some cheer through the mail.

* mowaa.org

Sign on to deliver meals to local seniors, and bring the kids along to visit. Even better, bake your own dessert to add to the offerings. 

make you more of a Scrooge than a Santa, Ng says. His advice: Make a list of to-do's and ink in some time to spend with your family (say, looking at Christmas lights) and with yourself to stay sane (take a head-clearing Saturday-morning walk). "Everything seems to take top priority when you feel overwhelmed," Ng says. "But writing it all down gives you a framework for what really needs to be done—and a sense of accomplishment when you cross those tasks off your list." It'll also give tangible proof that you're booked up on Sunday night, and therefore won't have time to make cookies for Sara's class. And instead of feeling guilty about saying no, remember that turning someone down gives you more time to enjoy the activities you do commit to.

Meltdown moment: Mom's tradition is Christmas at her house at 1 p.m. Your in-laws' tradition is Christmas at their house at 5 p.m. Two events in one day plus an hour's drive each way plus one toddler who needs a nap adds up to a non-merry Christmas for you.

» **Stay-cool strategy:** If you and your family show up moody and frazzled, everyone will wish you had stayed home—most of all you—so it's important for you and your husband to prepare a game plan to keep your holiday happy. "Before you commit to either family, decide with your guy which holidays are in high demand for his family and yours," Poch says. If Christmas Day is a must-show for both—and you're willing to take the drive—see if Mom can host dinner an hour earlier, and if your mother-in-law can push back dessert until 6. Whatever you decide, be honest with both families that you intend to be as fair as possible, whether that means you'll be alternating holidays and therefore skipping your mother-in-law's this year, or will only be able to show up for dessert. When you're being pulled in two different directions, it's easy to forget about the third family in the mix—yours! —Nicole Yorio