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A decent holiday photo -- is that too much to ask?

Holidays bring loved ones together. What better time for a photo?

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In his collection of essays, "The Santaland Diaries," David Sedaris chronicled his time working as an elf at Macy's in Manhattan over the holidays. Among his duties: tending a queue of eager families, all pining for the single perfect photo of their tykes perched on Santa's knee. Their kids cried. Their kids puked. But the parents soldiered on.



(Jose Luis Pelaez, Blend Images/via Getty Images)

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A decent holiday photo: Was it too much to ask?

Whether or not you boast a cadre of certified elves, taking great group photos of family and friends over the holidays is possible. Really possible. (And not in that down-the-chimney way.) With a little practice, communication and — maybe most importantly — Zen, you'll capture some precious seasonal memories.

"Photos enable us to better remember and focus on our close relationships and positive experiences, even when family is far away and the holidays are over," said Jenika McDavitt, the Baltimore-based photographer behind the blog, PsychologyForPhotographers.com.

When you volunteer to photograph a group of people, you are giving a gift to everyone in the

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frame. The "attendees will be grateful that someone took the time to take the pictures," said New York-area etiquette consultant Melissa Leonard.

We talked to experts about how to document this spirited season. Here are a few tips to get you started — whether you're capturing your kids' first snowman, or corralling your partying friends on New Year's Eve.

Arm yourself: During the holiday hustle, it's easy to forget your camera. Get in the habit of traveling with it so you'll be ready for any memory that beckons for a snap.

Master the machine: Wait, we may be getting ahead of ourselves. Get familiar with your camera before any high-pressure situation. If you need a refresher on how to operate your timer delay (and who doesn't?) review your manual. (If you can't find the booklet, it's undoubtedly accessible online.) And if you're shooting with an iPhone or iPad, heed this tip from Jeff Carlson, Seattle-based author of "The iPad for Photographers" (Peachpit Press): Hold the shutter button on your device's screen until you're ready to take your picture. "Then you just have to slide your finger (off of the shutter to) take the exposure." That way you won't blur your photo by tapping any buttons on your device.

Flash, not: The built-in bulb on most cameras is unflattering. Avoid flash if you can, or consider investing in a supplementary flash device to get warm, natural skin tones. Or just take two photos: one with flash, one without. You can choose or doctor the photo on your computer later.

Sneak behind the scenes: People often think of holiday photos as formal, staged group images. Capture the moments before and after your group shot to give your gathering some context. Shoot Grandpa while he pours Champagne, capture Aunt Cecilia as she ices the Jell-O salad, or stalk the munchkins as they size up their wrapped gifts.

Try, try again: Margie Connors of Rowayton, Conn. has organized creative family Christmas photos for the past 27 years. In order to snag the family's signature seasonal image, she has intrepidly floated her family in a sailboat, "scampered" back and forth across a Venetian gondola, and smuggled her camera through the Alhambra in Spain. "When I'm dead and gone," Connors said, "(my kids) can look back at each subsequent year of Christmas cards. You see the entire growth of our family. My parents always took Christmas card pictures of us — we suffered through it, so I owe my kids the same experience." Creativity and persistence will pay off.

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Enlist a comrade: Maybe you need an art director to curate your shot, a clown to get everyone giggling, or a drill sergeant to peel your family away from the punch bowl. Anticipate your needs and find the best person to help you meet them.

First step, prep: If you have a tripod, set it up. This device will keep your camera steady — especially important in dim rooms. (If you don't have a tripod, mimic one: Stand with your legs wide and grip the camera steady.) Take some practice shots before assembling the group. Have everything ready to go, so your subjects can just show up and smile.

Hurry! Once you shepherd your group into position, the clock ticks — fast. Smiles fade, kids fidget and the bickering resumes. Do your best to mind the time.

Widen the circle: As the photographer, be sure to include everyone in the room (at least for a few shots). "When there is a big family portrait, there is sometimes that single person who never got married, is widowed or divorced, (or who doesn't) have kids. It can be awkward for (him) as each family flocks (together) for the photo," said Leonard. "Always make that individual feel comfortable and welcome. Be the one who cheerfully says 'come over here.'"

Create conifers: Alter the heights in your group, like a row of varied pine trees, to add visual interest.

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