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How to Have a Holiday Gift Exchange From a Distance

Tips on buying, shipping, gifting — and opening — presents during the pandemic

By [Brette Sember](#) | November 30, 2020 | [Living](#)

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If you can't be with your family this holiday season for a gift exchange, you can still celebrate virtually. Shipping gifts and enjoying a family get-together via videoconferencing is a great way to make the most of the situation and create holiday magic.



Holiday Gifts in a Pandemic

The first question is what to buy. Julie Schechter, founder and CEO of [Small Packages](#) says, "This is a moment when people like getting tangible gifts more than ever. Because so much of our lives has moved online, it's less fun to get a gift card."

Gabrielle Pastorek, retail analyst at [Finder.com](#) suggests, "Gifting a loved one a basket filled with cleaning wipes, sanitizer and non-perishable food items could be a great idea this year."

Books, note cards, candles or any other small, easily packable item could also be considered.

To Wrap or Not to Wrap

Bows and delicate wrapping paper may not hold up well when shipped. "Stay away from puffy bows. They never look as good on the other end of the trip. Instead, use flat ribbon and tie some bells or a flat ornament or tag on it," suggests Aileen Avery, author of "Gift Rap: The History and Art of Gift Giving."

"Send a roll of wrapping paper, too, so they don't have to get extra supplies."

Vera Marie Badertscher, 81, of Tucson, Ariz., says, "I am trying to avoid gift wrap as much as possible in favor of reusable [items], like reusable gift bags. Or wrapping in a pretty T-shirt, dish towel or pillow covers."

Another option is to ship direct and "ask a household member of the recipient to wrap for you. Or send them to another family member in the area and have them drop off the gifts at the recipient's doorstep," recommends Laurice Wardini of [GiftMighty](#).

Schechter adds, "Send a roll of wrapping paper, too, so they don't have to get extra supplies."

You can also shop online and pay for gift wrap. Consumer savings expert Andrea Woroch says to expect to pay \$5 per gift for gift wrap service. Compare that to the cost of shipping the gifts to you, then to your recipient.

Schechter points out direct shipping reduces the carbon footprint of the gift by shipping it once. Gifting expert Russell Brightwell mentions another benefit: "If the retailer sends the item and it arrives broken, they will replace it."

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Shipping Secrets

To get the gifts there safely, [UPS recommends two inches of padding](#) around each item with bubble wrap, air bags or shipping peanuts. For heavy items, tightly crumpled kraft paper works best. Pastorek recommends you "do a shake test before sealing the box. The goal is to have as little movement as possible."

In addition to putting your shipping label on the outside, include a copy inside the box in case the label comes off.

Protecting the gifts from weather is a concern. Marijke Durning, 59, in Montreal, Quebec, [makes and ships quilts](#) all over the continent. She wraps the quilt, then "I put it in a plastic bag before the shipping box in case the box gets wet in transit or if it's left on a doorstep in the rain."

Compare shipping costs online before committing to one service. [USPS flat rate priority boxes](#) allow you to ship up to 70 pounds in one box and often are the least expensive route.

Gina Panettieri, 60, of Milford, Conn., buys decorative holiday shipping boxes and padded envelopes at her post office. She brings the unwrapped gifts and bubble wrap and packs them right there, paying for the box and postage together. "You're done in like two minutes and they go right under the tree," she explains.



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Tech Tips

Videoconferencing lets you see the gift opening. [There are a few options to consider](#). Zoom is free, but only for 40 minutes, which probably won't be enough to truly spend the holiday together. FaceTime is free, but only works on Apple devices. Google Meet is free, but every participant must have a Google account. It's limited to a group of 25 people.

Tech expert Mark Varnas from Red9, a database support service, suggests, "Set up your laptop by your TV and display the video call on the larger screen," so everyone can see.

"When people are exchanging gifts, have each of them sit in the 'hot seat' at their site so they can be seen or heard while they open their gifts."

To get the video on your TV, Alex Rodas of GroovyTech explains, "If you have an Apple computer and Apple TV on your television, you can Airplay your virtual hangout to your TV that way. If you have a PC and a Google Chromecast on your TV, you can cast your virtual hangout that way."

Varnas recommends using your phone to "call into the conference using the phone number. This will free up bandwidth for the video, meaning you'll get better quality from both the video and the audio. Use a Bluetooth speaker for the output and hook up a microphone for the input. A cheap wired microphone will make a huge difference in the sound."

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Time to Open the Presents

If you've ever been on a group video call, you know it can be hard to hear everyone. Gift exchanges tend to chaotic, even in person.

Wardini advises, "Definitely take turns! It's easiest to have the spotlight on one person at a time to ensure nobody misses anything."

To do this, Varnas says, "If you're in a group of people — say, one quarantine pod calling another pod — create a 'hot seat' in front of the camera. When people are exchanging gifts, have each of them sit in the hot seat at their site so they can be seen or heard while they open their gifts."

Pastorek adds, "Remind everyone to open gifts on a desk or other high surface so everyone can see."

Making sure everyone can hear each other can be a challenge. Varnas suggests, "Make liberal use of the mute button as the meeting administrator. When doing the gift exchange, unmute the two people who are exchanging gifts."

Alternatively, Avery opines, "It's not much fun for everyone to sit on Zoom and watch as each person opens their gift. Use breakout rooms so people can really talk. You can rotate people around in the breakouts, say every ten to fifteen minutes, so everyone has time to talk with everyone else."

Consider letting children open their gifts first so they can go play. Santa can still make an appearance by calling in from the North Pole (outside or in front of a holiday background).

Schechter says you can achieve "a sense of togetherness if everyone is enjoying the same food or beverage, like they would be if the group were in person. Send everyone the same cookies or wine."

Once you're done opening gifts, it can be hard to keep a large group call going, so plan activities such as:

- Holiday or family trivia
- Taking turns sharing old family holiday photos
- Having a gingerbread or cookie decorating contest
- Watching a holiday movie together
- Having an ugly sweater contest
- Playing [holiday music](#) karaoke

No matter how far apart your family is, you can still experience a holiday gift exchange together.

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