

The art of (Christmas) conversation

Christmas is a great time to catch up with family members you may not have seen all year but, sometimes, finding suitable topics of conversation can feel like a minefield. **LOUISE HOWLAND** outlines some tips on helping the conversation flow this festive season.

Christmas should be a special time for families, especially for children. Yet, for many, the festive season is often a stressful period. Just getting everything done before the big day is a challenge, and then there's also the anxiety-inducing Christmas gathering.

Whether it is Christmas dinner with the extended family (including those stray relatives you never see at any other time, unless there's been a wedding or funeral recently), an 'orphans' Christmas for singles or expats, or even a meal with your new partner's family, there's a likelihood that you'll be spending time with people you don't see often, may not know well and may not have much in common with. Our family relationships can be tribal rather than a natural coming together of people with shared interests, so there is plenty of room for dysfunctional communication.

Whatever the make-up of our gatherings, sadly, it can be a relief when it's all over, rather than Christmas being what we really want it to be: a time of laughter, joy and good cheer shared with our nearest and dearest. Maybe we all just need to learn to talk to each other again, improve our communication skills and get to know each other better.

Spending time together

While the economy means that some of us may hold back on overspending this Christmas, spending time with loved ones is probably more memorable than the latest fad toy or techno device. Used as we are to 24/7 connectedness, genuine face-to-face conversation is a different and

increasingly rare animal.

We may find ourselves getting stuck in conversational ruts. The same people tend to talk a lot, others are quiet. People who dominate conversations can come across as insensitive and self-involved but, sometimes, this person does not mean to be rude; they may simply feel a responsibility to fill in the blanks to keep the party going.

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Regardless of how often we communicate with someone, or for how long, most of us want to enjoy genuine affinity rather than feeling that the time together is an awkward and uncomfortable duty. Yet, sometimes, it is tricky to have meaningful exchanges across the generations or between in-laws who may not always see eye to eye. We may talk more easily with strangers and acquaintances, and be more curious about the lives of celebrities than our own families.

Reviving the art of conversation is a perfect option for the big day; whether to generate truly satisfying ways of breaking the ice, introduce new people to each other, or provide a focus during the post-lunch dead-zone when the adults get sleepy and the children get fractious. With a little advance preparation and thought about the conversation, you will find that the talk flows as freely as the Christmas food and drink.



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Tips to get you talking

Plan some questions that are outside the routine chat and usual topics. A diverse group brings rare opportunities to explore family histories and mysteries, meaning this can be the ideal time to get varied perspectives on myriad subjects and learn about the things that matter. Dream up some thoughtful open-ended questions and be amazed by what is shared.

Better fun than any quiz, such conversations will guarantee that your family and friends will enjoy warm and convivial times, without the stress and competitiveness of the Christmas quiz! Mix up the questions and aim to keep the discussions moving and fun.

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in the middle of a party. It's also good to resist providing lengthy updates on health at festive gatherings. 'How are you?' is usually a greeting rather than a question on these occasions.

Make sure that everyone, regardless of their age or perceived status within the family, has equal opportunity to speak about each topic, from great grandma to the eccentric uncle to the monosyllabic teen to the youngest child. Encourage listening by ensuring that everyone is comfortable and able to hear without competing against clattering crystal, and ask that everyone turns off their devices and enjoy actually hearing people LOL (laugh out loud).

People usually listen attentively if they know that they will get an opportunity to speak. Limit responses to a minute or three to prevent boredom during lengthy monologues. A timer that makes a funny

noise is a lighthearted and inoffensive way to quieten the over-effusive talker and indicate that it is the next person's turn.

Making the most of it

Christmas is a time for getting together to renew and strengthen our family bonds as different generations come together and we relate with various degrees of success. Yet we tend to put all our efforts into planning the presents and the meals, with little or no thought as to how the dynamics of the group may work so that we share truly happy times and create warm memories.

It's a time for remembering that none of us are around forever so it is worth considering the best way to get the most out of our times together. Christmas is the ideal time to connect and simply share the experiences of life, embracing and enjoying our differences. ♥

Some open-ended questions to try

- ♥ What was the highlight of your year?
- ♥ How could someone spoil you for a day?
- ♥ What would you do if you were sure to get away with it?
- ♥ Happiness is a bowl of what and/or a glass of what under a shady tree?
- ♥ What's a place starting with the first letter of your name you would like to explore?
- ♥ What is fun about being a child?
- ♥ What's the best surprise you've ever had?

Louise Howland is the co-creator of game series The Art of Conversation (€10 available from International Books) and has vast experience with dysfunctional Christmas gatherings. Visit www.taocuk.com.