

We all want an album of treasured photographs, but most of us never get around to organising all those piles of pictures. Now help is at hand, says **Karen Robinson**

You will probably take some photos of your nearest and dearest over the coming days: adorable moppets in a sea of wrapping paper, gazing in innocent wonder at their new Barbie Gymnastic Diva or the Power Ranger Mystic Force Dx Megazord Centaurus; the family around the festive board, paper crowns atop shiny faces, smiling that special red-eyed photo smile...

But what will happen to those captured memories? Will they languish in a cupboard or on your hard drive, along with the holiday snaps, the pictures of you all in your best clothes, but delightfully "relaxed" at a cousin's wedding, and the moppets' birthday parties? Odds are that somewhere on the second page of your life's to-do list is "the family photo album". The years roll on and it's still on the list, an increasingly daunting prospect.

Trista Connor, 34, a personal concierge for Buy-time, a London-based lifestyle management company, knows the problem. She has just finished working with one of the cash-rich, time-poor types who make up her client base – the woman hadn't even done her wedding album, and her children are now five and three. So, Connor breaks off from a solid schedule of Christmas giftwrapping for her clients to help me out.

"Gather all your photos together and find a large, flat surface," she says. "It's a big project – not something you can tackle in a day. You need a few sessions over several weeks." Best not to enthusiastically commandeer the dining table on Christmas Eve, then.

What if you've gone digital, and your photos only exist as pixels? You will have to get them printed out: you are making an album for the family to enjoy for years to come, not compiling a database. That said, Connor advises getting "real" prints scanned and put on a CD, so you have a digital backup and can play around with them – take out the dreaded red eye, see how they'd look in sepia tones – then make as many prints as you need. You might want multiple copies if you decide to do an album for each of your children.

You might also like to think about whether you want special themed books for, say, holidays, Christmases, sports activities and achievements, old family photos (inherited from forebears who never got round to doing their albums, either). This doesn't have to be decided at the outset: indeed, the process of selecting from what tips out onto your large, flat surface should help you to make up your mind. Sort them into "love", "like" and "hate", then sort the "loves" into categories.

At this stage, you might start to have a minor nervous breakdown about the vast swathes of undated snaps you have unearthed. Relax, Connor advises – unless you know you can date every photo and achieve a strict chronological order, just forget it. "It's nice to have photos with some feeling," she says, "rather than just be able to say, 'That was 1991, that was 1992.'" And you don't have to put every single photo into date order. Make your pick first, then have a go with those.

I had thought digital photography was to blame for the proliferation of pictures



Snap happy: Karen Robinson tries to turn a mess of memories into a cherished family album

Keep the family in it

you take on any given occasion (and non-occasion). Yet, as Connor and I excavated the contents of my photo cupboard (I'm not saying it's sizable, but I could probably rent the space out to an overseas language student once the photographs are finally cleared), I realised that I had been oversnapping onto film for most of the 1990s – just so I could chuck it all out a decade later, it seems.

Take, for example, the pile of snaps from the National Childbirth Trust class get-together of a dozen new mums and babies. I had difficulty recognising myself and my own child, never mind anyone else – I never saw them again. "Hold on to one, to remind you," Connor counsels, "but don't put anything in the album unless it has a special place in your heart. The point of the album is to make you think of good times – but you should also think of the people who will be looking at it, so it's not just about how it makes you feel."

Ditch the landscapes and "the view from our hotel" – people are much more interesting than scenery. And, much more problematic, what about old lovers, ex-spouses and former friends? If you're compiling the album for your children, you should include pictures of their father,

even if you are no longer together, and regardless of how you feel about him. As for the other people in the frame, are they still friends? Are they relevant? Do you want to remember them? There is a place for photographs of previous boyfriends or girlfriends, but that place is definitely not in the family album. If it was an important relationship, keep some pictures, but in another, smaller book.

Connor says the biggest issue with her clients is "looking fat". She says she persuaded one woman to include a picture she disliked, as the rest of the family looked lovely, but admits that "she probably took it out after I left". I used to systematically destroy all unflattering pictures practically before I was out of the door of Snappy Snaps, leading to the

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erroneous but pleasing impression, given by the handful of photos that remain, that I was amazingly glamorous and good-looking. This got less easy when I was sharing the frame with an impossibly gorgeous little boy.

Connor picks up a snap of me and my son, Cal, then about seven, looking winsome in a bluebell wood.

"That's a nice picture," she says. "Oh, he had chickenpox." I reply, remembering it all too well.

"That's a great picture to use, then," Connor pronounces. "It's got a story to it."

When you've finally made your selection, how do you compile the albums themselves? An enormous selection is available: classic rather than trendy will stand the test of time. Connor advises using only the right-hand pages, and choosing albums with a delicate interleaving of sugar paper to protect the prints (interestingly, the humungously expensive tome from the posh-people's stationer Smythson doesn't have this). She recommends corner mounts, so you can write information on the back of photographs and lift them out to read it.

Odd numbers of snaps on a page look better than even, and mounting pictures

The album chart

- A run of identical albums will look better on your shelves than odd sizes and colours
- Pick album colours that complement your interior decor
- Avoid those with see-through "sleeves" – they hold only standard-size photos and layouts
- Use a different layout for each page, with an odd number of pictures, and mix up formal portraits with more candid shots
- Albums: top dollar, red leather with gold tooling (in picture), £185, by Smythson (www.smythson.com); mid-range, soft pigskin suede in various pastel colours, £95, by Pickett (www.pickett.co.uk); budget, velvet maroon album with beaded pattern (in picture, on sofa), £14.99, from Wyevale (www.wyevale.co.uk)

you particularly love on a contrasting coloured card is effective. If you have had professional portraits taken, mix them with informal snaps. As for those school photos with the eerie pastel backgrounds, Connor thinks that a series of the passport-size versions would make a great border or page. "It depends how creative you want to be," she says. At the same time, she counsels against "tacky" extraneous page decoration, such as glittery snowflakes with Christmas scenes.

One final warning: don't put your family album on the internet. Even if you take the right precautions with your privacy settings, you still can't be sure how secure those precious childhood images really are.

So, get out the gummed corner mounts and a wastepaper bin for the rejects. Above all, don't turn it into a chore. "Enjoy it," Connor says, "and enjoy the memories."

Buy-time, 0870 486 2624, www.buy-time.co.uk; from £29 per hour

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