

Making the Most of the Holidays for Your Family and Your Son/Daughter on the Autism Spectrum

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While many happily anticipate the coming holiday season, families of sons/daughters on the autism spectrum also understand the special challenges that may occur when schedules are disrupted and routines broken. Our hope is that by following these few helpful tips, families may lessen the stress and anxiety created by the holiday season and make it a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. The following tips were developed with input from the Autism Society of America, the Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Easter Seals Crossroads, Sonya Ansari Center for Autism at Logan, and the Indiana Autism Leadership Network and are updated annually.

1. Preparation is crucial for most individuals. At the same time, it is important to determine how much preparation a specific person may need. For example, if your son or daughter has a tendency to become anxious when anticipating an event that is to occur in the future, you may want to adjust how many days in advance you prepare him or her. Preparation can occur in various ways by using a calendar and marking the date of various holiday events, or by creating a Social Story that highlights what will happen at a given event.
2. Having decorations around the house may be disruptive for some. It may be helpful to revisit pictures from previous holidays that show decorations in the house. If such a book does not exist, use this holiday season to create a picture book. For some it may also be helpful to take them shopping with you for holiday decorations so that they are engaged in the process. Or involve them in the process of decorating the house. And once holiday decorations have been put up, you may need to create rules about those that can be touched and those that cannot be touched. Be direct, specific and consistent. We also realize that with some individuals, decorations may not be feasible. Create a visual schedule for decorating and other holiday events. See examples on our website at: <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=3590>.
3. If your child has difficulty with change, you may want to gradually decorate the house. For example, on the first day put up the Christmas tree, then on the next day decorate the tree and so on. And again, engage them as much as possible in this process. It may be helpful to develop a visual schedule or calendar that shows what will be done on each day. At the same time, it may also be helpful to inform them of the process for removing decorations. This process may be disruptive for some individuals as well.
4. If your child begins to obsess about a particular gift or toy they want, it may be helpful to be specific and direct about the number of times a child can mention the toy. One suggestion is to give your child 5 poker chips. They are allowed to exchange one poker chip for 5 minutes of talking about the desired gift. Also, if you have no intention of purchasing a specific toy, it serves no purpose to tell the child that maybe they will get the gift. This will only lead to problems in the future. Always choose to be clear about your intentions.
5. You and your child can make a list of what he or she wants for the holiday. The list could include the website where the gift can be purchased, the price and other critical information. This list should be organized with a small box at the end or beginning of each item. The list can be shared with family members or friends who want to “register” to

purchase gifts by putting their initials in the box. For an example of this, visit our website at <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=3590>.

6. Teach your child how to leave a situation and/or how to access support when an event becomes overwhelming. For example, if you are having visitors, have a safe/calm space set aside for the individual with their favorite items/toys available. The individual should be taught ahead of time that they should go to their space when feeling overwhelmed. Practice this strategy often throughout the year and when the individual is calm. This self-management tool will serve the individual into adulthood. For children who are not at that level of self-management, develop a signal or cue for them to show when they are getting anxious and prompt them to use the space. For children with more significant challenges, practice using this space in a calm manner at various times prior to your guest's arrival. Take the child into the room and engage them in calming activities (e.g., play soft music, rub his/her back, turn down the lights, etc.). Then when you notice the child becoming anxious, calmly remove him/her from the anxiety-provoking setting immediately and take him/her into the calming environment. Make sure others respect your child's need for space and do not intrude.

7. Teaching your child how to use a break card by modeling or directly teaching this approach in advance may help your child communicate the need to leave when situations become overwhelming.

8. If you are traveling for the holidays, make sure you have the child's favorite foods, books or toys available. Having familiar items readily available can help to calm stressful situations. Also prepare them via social stories or other communication systems, for any unexpected delays in travel. If your son/daughter is flying for the first time, it may be helpful to bring your child to the airport in advance and to help them become accustomed to airports and planes. Use social stories and pictures to rehearse what will happen when boarding and flying.

9. Know your child and how much noise and activity they can tolerate. If you detect that a situation may be becoming overwhelming, help your child find a quiet area in which to regroup. And there may be some situations that you simply avoid (e.g., crowded shopping malls the day after Thanksgiving). Again, a break card may be helpful.

10. Prepare a photo album in advance of the relatives and other guests who will be visiting during the holidays. Allow the child access to these photos at all times and also go through the photo album with your child while talking briefly about each family member.

11. In preparation for the holiday season, you might want to practice opening gifts, taking turns and waiting for others, or giving gifts to others. Use a visual turn taking card to help with this process. Role play scenarios with your child in preparation for them getting a gift they do not want. Talk through this process to avoid embarrassing moments with family members. The New Social Story Book by Carol Gray (2010) contains a number of social stories on gifts.

12. You might also choose to practice certain religious rituals. Work with a speech language pathologist or other professionals to construct pages of vocabulary or topic boards that relate to the holidays and family traditions.

13. It may also be helpful to prepare family members for strategies to use to minimize anxiety or behavioral incidents, and to enhance participation. Help them to understand if your son/daughter prefers to be hugged or not, needs calm discussions, or provide other suggestions that will facilitate a smoother holiday season. If your child becomes upset, it might also be helpful to coach others to remain calm and neutral in an effort to minimize behavioral outbursts.

14. If your family member is on special diet, make sure there is food available that they can eat. And even if they are not on a special diet, be cautious of the amount of sugar consumed.

15. Since holidays may place extra stress on a child, this may not be the time to introduce them to new demands. Your son or daughter may need the comfort of their routines. For example, try to maintain a sleep, meal routine, and other important routines.

16. Above all, know your child. Know how much noise and other sensory input they can take. Know their level of anxiety and the amount of preparation it may take. Know their fears, and know those things that will make the season more enjoyable for them.

17. During dinner, it may be a challenge for your child to eat at the same table as the entire family. Have options available. Realizing that the holidays are stressful, make sure that some of your son/daughters favorite foods are available during dinner. Again, this may not be the time to force them to try new foods.

18. If feasible, hire a respite provider or babysitter to be available during a section of the holidays so that other family members may be able to enjoy the day.

19. In preparation for the family holiday event, rehearse conversation topics in advance with your son/daughter. Develop a signal to help them understand when they should shift topics. Make a list of acceptable topics and a list of those they should not discuss. Practice this list in advance.

20. Equally important is to prompt family members about topics of discussion that they can engage your son/daughter in and those they should avoid.

Most important, remember to relax and not get unduly stressed. Your son/daughter may in all likelihood react to that stress. ***And most of all have a wonderful holiday season!***