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Autism Agenda



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Twelve Tips for Helping Individuals with Autism Have a Happy Holiday Season

While many happily anticipate the coming holiday season, families of people 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 of the holiday season and make it a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. The following tips were developed with input from the Autism Society, the Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Easter Seals Crossroads, the Sonya Ansari Center for Autism at Logan and the Indiana Autism Leadership Network.

- 1. Preparation is crucial for many 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 dates of various holiday events, or by creating a social story that highlights what will happen at a given event.
- 2. 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 photo book does not exist, use this holiday season to create one. 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 and cannot be touched. Be direct, specific and consistent.
- 3. If a person with autism 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.
- 4. If a person with autism begins to obsess about a particular gift or item they want, it may be helpful to be specific and direct about the number of times they can mention the gift.** One suggestion is to give them five chips. They are allowed to exchange one chip for five minutes of talking about the desired gift. Also, if you have no intention of purchasing a specific item, it serves no purpose to tell them that maybe they will get the gift. This will only lead to problems in the future. Always choose to be direct and specific about your intentions.



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12 TIPS FOR HELPING INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM CONTINUED....

- 5. Teach them 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 space set aside for the child as his/her safe/calm space. The individual should be taught ahead of time that they should go to their space when feeling overwhelmed. This self-management tool will serve the individual into adulthood. For those 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 individuals with more significant challenges, practice using this space in a calm manner at various times prior to your guests' arrival. Take them 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 individual becoming anxious, calmly remove him/her from the anxiety-provoking setting immediately and take him/her into the calming environment.
- 6. If you are traveling for the holidays, make sure you have their 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 you are flying for the first time, it may be helpful to bring the individual to the airport in advance and help him/her to become accustomed to airports and planes. Use social stories and pictures to rehearse what will happen when boarding and flying.
- 7. Be prepared and stand firm.** Accept well-meaning but unwanted advice with the phrase, "I'll have to think about that," and smile.
- 8. Prepare a photo album in advance of the relatives and other guests who will be visiting during the holidays.** Allow the person with autism access to these photos at all times and also go through the photo album with him/her while talking briefly about each family member.
- 9. Practice opening gifts, taking turns and waiting for others, and giving gifts. Role play scenarios with your child in preparation for him/her getting a gift they do not want.** Talk through this process to avoid embarrassing moments with family members. You might also choose to practice certain religious rituals. Work with a speech language pathologist to construct pages of vocabulary or topic boards that relate to the holidays and family traditions.
- 10. Prepare family members for strategies to use to minimize anxiety or behavioral incidents, and to enhance participation.** Help them to understand if the person with autism prefers to be hugged or not, needs calm discussions or provide other suggestions that will facilitate a smoother holiday season. If the individual becomes upset, it might also be helpful to coach others to remain calm and neutral in an effort to minimize behavioral outbursts.
- 11. If the person with autism is on special diet, make sure there is food available that he/she can eat.** And even if they are not on a special diet, be cautious of the amount of sugar consumed. And try to maintain a sleep and meal routine.
- 12. Above all, know your loved one with autism.** Know how much noise and other sensory input they can tolerate. Know their level of anxiety and the amount of preparation it may take. If you detect that a situation may be becoming overwhelming, help them 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). Know their fears and those things that will make the season more enjoyable for them.

Don't stress. Plan in advance. And most of all have a wonderful holiday season!

<https://www.autism-society.org/holiday-tips/>



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HOW TO HELP KIDS HANDLE HOLIDAY DISAPPOINTMENT

How to Help Kids Handle Holiday Disappointment During COVID-19

By: [Amy Adolfo Signore, PhD, MPH](#) and [Emily Wakefield, PsyD](#)

This year has been difficult to say the least. With the holidays approaching – and the challenges and uncertainty of the coronavirus pandemic still ongoing – you may be wondering how to help your child cope with the disappointment of things being different this year.

Connecticut Children’s pediatric psychologists join the blog with advice.

(We’ve grouped suggestions by age, but tips for younger children apply to older children and adults alike.)

0-3 years old: Focus on quality time during the holidays – and don’t worry about the details.

- Children this age will not be able to recall detailed memories of holidays past and will not recall the events of this year in the future.
- It’s okay to keep things very simple for children this age in terms of celebrations and explanations.
- All children benefit from having quiet-down time to feel love and attention from parents. With social distancing and quarantine measures in place, this is the perfect season to indulge kids with affection.



4-6 years old: Create new, quarantine-approved holiday traditions.

- Establish traditions within your immediate family – make holiday decorations, make a home-made gift, cook a special meal.
- Instead of in-person visits with friends, family or even Santa, consider fun ways to have a video interaction, write letters or make cards.
- Don’t punish children for having a negative reaction to holiday changes this year. Tell them that it’s okay to feel sad, disappointed or angry.
- Find the positive and teach positive self-talk. For example, “Since we don’t have to travel, we get extra time to relax and play at home.”



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HOW TO HELP KIDS HANDLE HOLIDAY DISAPPOINTMENT CONTINUED...

6-12 years old: Help your child cope with holiday blues – and build resilience for the future.

- At this age, children understand the precautions that need to be taken due to COVID-19.
- Validate their feelings of disappointment and sadness about changes to their holiday traditions: It's normal and OK to feel angry, frustrated or sad.
- Remember that helping children overcome disappointment helps them build resiliency.
- Ask them for their ideas about how to make the holiday special.
- Teach fun relaxation strategies – [try yoga](#) for the first time, or [practice slowly breathing](#) in and out the scent of a favorite treat, lotion or candle.

13-18 years old: Ask, listen and encourage COVID-safe holiday activities.

- Ask teens how they are feeling.
- Let them know you are there if they need to talk.
- Listen! Often, teens just want someone to listen and not solve the problem for them.
- Offer perspective on the situation by looking at the big picture.
- Allow them a sense of control by giving them choices – maybe to have friend over on a different day to celebrate the holiday, or allow them to plan a special activity.
- Encourage positive social activities to honor the holiday season, such as how to volunteer in a socially distanced way.



Parents and caregivers: Manage your own disappointment about this holiday season.

- Allow yourself to feel sad, worried or angry.
- Do something to nurture yourself.
- Adjust your expectations.
- Look at the big picture.
- Children take cues from their parents. If you maintain a positive, festive and calm demeanor, your kids will pick up on that and do the same.

In addition to finding ways to understand and support the feelings of your kids, you can also find creative ways to celebrate the holidays despite the pandemic. We've included a few suggestions in the **Related Links** below (please go to the webpage below for the links).

Let this be your guide to finding all the hope, peace, joy and sense of renewal that a traditional holiday season brings.

<https://www.connecticutchildrens.org/coronavirus/how-to-help-kids-handle-holiday-disappointment-during-covid-19/>

FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT FOR YOUR CHILD

How One Dad Finds the Perfect Gift for His Child with Autism

My daughter can't tell me what she wants for Christmas. Here's how I figure it out.

If you're a caregiver for someone living with autism — particularly a child — one of the biggest stressors around the holidays can be figuring out what kind of gift to get them.



[Autism](#) sometimes includes unconventional or sporadic communication, so developing a gift list is typically more labor-intensive than saying, "Hey, make a list of what you'd like!" My daughter, Lily, lives with autism. And this year (as last), she wants nothing. Whether the holiday season (in our case, Christmas) is more for her or for me is a no-brainer: It's for *me*.

I've given up all pretense that my desire for her to open presents is bringing her joy. I'm satisfied with just making the holidays as stress-free for her as possible, still enjoying the traditions I grew up with and am unwilling to leave behind, adapting those traditions to fit her neurology, *and* also meeting the expectations of my older, [neurotypical](#) daughter, Emma.

It's challenging at any time to find out what Lily wants since she doesn't necessarily respond to questions like "What do you want?" regardless of the topic. This makes meeting her needs and wants challenging under any circumstances, but significantly more stressful when asking not just for one or two things, but dozens (Lily also has a birthday in December).

This challenge isn't uncommon on the autism spectrum, though it — like most things in the spectral world — isn't a universally shared trait.

So how do you know what to buy for that special someone you love when communication is less straightforward than "Make a list"? Here are 10 suggestions I hope help you.

1. Ask

OK, OK, I know I just premised this entire article on what to buy when you *can't* get easy answers, but I think it's still important to ask.

I ask Lily every year, as many times as I can remember, in a lot of different ways. Lily doesn't often respond to my questions, but sometimes it's because she doesn't like the way they're phrased.

Changing the way I ask will sometimes allow her to better understand. Some different ways I ask are:

- "What do you want?"
- "What do you like to play with?"
- "Does [insert toy] look fun?"
- "What is your favorite toy?"

And this one succeeds for me sometimes in a way I don't understand but that makes me happy: "I wonder what Lily would like for Christmas."

Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's not. But if you can find out straight from them, that's obviously the quickest and easiest solution.

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FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT FOR YOUR CHILD CONTINUED...

2. Remember: Not all communication is verbal

Anyone who's cared for someone who communicates in a nontraditional fashion has heard this phrase, and it applies to the holiday season as well.

Lily communicates her love for certain toys or activities by virtue of sheer repetition. So, what does your loved one enjoy doing?

Lily loves to play with her iPad, turn the pages of books, listen to music, and play with her princess castle. Again, it may be obvious, but I look for ways to supplement those things I know she loves already.

Streaming music may have made buying CDs all but obsolete, but perhaps a new Bluetooth speaker or headphones is needed. Or maybe new princesses for her castle, or similar playsets, like a farm or amusement park set, that allow her to play in a way similar to something she already enjoys.

3. Ask the experts

Every year, I ask Lily's teachers and therapists what toys and activities she loves while she's there. I don't always get those types of details in their daily reports, so finding out she loves a specific scooter in gym class, an adapted bike, or a specific song is often news to me.

Lily's routines vary based on venue, so what interests her at school isn't typically mentioned at home, because she knows it's not available. Making something she enjoys at school available to her in a new setting is often a good gift idea for her.

As a parent, it can be tedious to listen to one thing over and over again, but if the goal is holiday happiness, then I'm looking for any way to hit that goal. Even if it means eventually sacrificing my sanity due to Wiggles overload.



4. Expand on a theme

Some children with autism find pleasure in a very specific, focused way. I have friends whose children will adore anything that is Thomas the Tank Engine, Legos, princesses, Wiggles, and so on. Lily's love is the Wiggles.

I look for ways to incorporate that love into different outlets. Wiggles dolls, books, coloring books, CDs, DVDs, clothing — all these gifts are more likely to be successful because of her love for the Wiggles' movies.

As a parent, it can be tedious to listen to one thing over and over again, but if the goal is holiday happiness, then I'm looking for any way to hit that goal. Even if it means eventually sacrificing my sanity due to Wiggles overload.

5. Embrace redundancy

There are some niche items for which there's no replacement. When it wears out, breaks, dies, or gets lost, it can be extremely triggering for your loved one.

Lily has a friend who loves a segmented, wooden toy snake. He uses it to self-soothe and stim. His mother has several duplicate copies of that snake, so if he loses it, he has another.

I have another friend whose son has a very specific favorite Steelers hat. She bought him another identical one for his birthday. Redundant gifts might not seem like "fun," but they're definitely helpful and useful.

6. Load up on comfy clothing

Those with autism can be extremely sensitive to touch. Some off-the-rack clothes seem scratchy, and the seams or tags can rub like sandpaper.

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FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT FOR YOUR CHILD CONTINUED...

When you find clothes that work, you stick with them. But you can't always find that clothing when you need it, so lots of pairs of identical pants can be more welcome than something "new" that may or may not feel good when it's worn. Stick with what works... and buy spares.

7. DIY some sensory toys and tools

Many autism schools (or learning support classrooms) have sensory rooms. While creating a full sensory room in your home may seem a bit cost-prohibitive, buying (or building) a component or two is not.



Whether it's a bubble tower, waterbed, soft-colored lights, or a stereo to play mellow music, you can get some great ideas online on how to create a relaxing, sensory-friendly, and satisfying safe space for your loved one. Searching for sensory room ideas online will give you a lot of potential gifts or DIY projects to tackle.

8. Be unconventional

When Lily was an infant, she loved diapers. Not so much wearing them, but playing with them. She'd dig into a box of diapers and pull them out, examine them, twist her hand back and forth and watch them, smell them (they have a pleasant scent), and then move on to the next one. For hours.

While it wasn't a typical present, we got Lily boxes of diapers. We let her rummage through them, pulling them out of the neatly stacked bags, scattering them everywhere, and then putting them back away again. We used the diapers more traditionally later, of course, but what she really wanted to do was play with them, so that was our gift to her. And she loved it.

Don't be afraid to give something unconventional just because it doesn't seem to be what you'd consider a traditional toy or gift. What seems unconventional to you may bring immense satisfaction to your child.

9. Get comfortable with gift cards

As kids transition through adolescence and approach adulthood, the almost universal desire to be able to choose for themselves seems stronger and stronger. While many people struggle with the idea of giving money or gift cards because they feel it's impersonal, it's often the "favorite" gift.

It's not just money. It's... freedom. I struggle giving gift cards to my older teen, Emma, but then I remember the goal with any gift is her happiness.

Lily loves McDonald's. During some past stretches, Lily's eating was a major hurdle, and one of the few things we could feed her that she'd tolerate was McDonald's chicken nuggets. One week during a vacation where all the food from the local grocery store was different and scary and unacceptable, we took her to eat at McDonald's 10 times.

I frequently give and receive McDonald's gift cards for Lily, and it's always a great gift. Almost every major retailer and restaurant has gift cards, so they're easy to find, too.

10. Invest in therapy tools and toys

Fidget toys, therapy swings, adaptive utensils, and weighted blankets are, perhaps not surprisingly, expensive. They make great gifts that, if not exactly traditional holiday gifts, are helpful and welcome. Sometimes the benefits of these tools and toys are observed only in a school or therapy setting, but can be used at home as well.

The stress of finding the "right" gift is perhaps less stressful if we allow ourselves to push past the expectations that confuse what's right for our loved ones living with autism with what's right for us, or what we ourselves would have wanted in their place.

A repeated theme in the autism world, we can't expect traditional or typical. We should adapt, and shoot instead for exceptional.

<https://www.healthline.com/health/autism/holiday-gifts-for-kids>

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HOW TO SUPPORT PICKY EATERS DURING THE HOLIDAYS

How to Support Picky Eaters During the Holidays

We've all been there, at a relative or friends house and our children are refusing to eat what is being served. It can be a stressful time, often causing us to second guess our parenting decisions, especially if we are with opinionated people who like to share how they handled those situations with their kids!

Parenting has shifted from "children are meant to be seen and not heard" to raising children who have voices and are being taught to display self-discipline. Whether your child has autism, displays sensory processing differences, or has a strong preference for what he/she likes and does not like, this can be one of those challenging moments as a parent, one that causes you to feel anxious, doubt yourself, and feel pressured to parent in a way you would prefer not to. While all parents struggle with children's eating habits at some time during their child's development, this is particularly concerning for parents of children with autism.

According to Ledford & Gast 2006, 46 to 89 percent of children with autism have some level of food selectivity. In this article you will find strategies for supporting yourself and your child during holiday meals. The first piece of advice I can give you is prepare yourself ahead of time. Read this article. Talk to your support system and your child's professional support staff. Make sure you receive the reassurance and support you need so that you are not tempted or pressured to make parenting decisions you don't want to make. By being predictable in your responses to your child, you will be helping ease their anxiety in a stressful situation.

In addition, the more pleasant the holiday meal is the more positive memories your child will have of the situation. Positive memories in situations and environments have been linked to higher levels of regulation in those situations and environments in the future while negative memories during situations and environments have been linked to more dysregulation within the situations/events. Planning for success will help ensure future success.

Furthermore, you will feel better about yourself if you trust your gut and follow your plan versus being persuaded to do something you don't believe in.



Ways to Desensitizing Your Child to Specific Foods

If it's important for you that your child tolerates the food served at the holiday meal, be prepared. With time, you may be able to gradually desensitize your child to the specific foods being served (Wheeler, 2019).

The following strategies can be helpful:

- Reach out to family and friends to find out the menu for the occasion.
- Begin working on slowly desensitizing your child to the foods that will be served.
- All children do best when food is presented as a choice and in a calm manner.
- Do not force your child to try the food. Begin small and celebrate small successes.
- Knowing where to start will be very individualized to your child.
- Begin with foods that are the best sensory fit for your child. For instance, if he/she prefers crunchy foods, start with a crunchy option.
- Slowly work on desensitizing one food at a time in a manner that works for your child.
- For example, you may want to begin with looking at pictures of the selected food, or having the food in a separate plate, in the same room as the child, so he/she can become desensitized to the smell and look of the food first.
- Other children may be able to tolerate the food on a separate plate within close proximity or on their plate with the understanding that there is no obligation to try the food.

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HOW TO SUPPORT PICKY EATERS DURING THE HOLIDAYS CONTINUED...

- A technique I've found helpful to desensitize children to the feel of food is to offer the food to the child at a proximity that's comfortable to the child while providing a "no thank you" mat next to the child. The only expectation for the child is to move the food to the mat if he/she does not want to try the food. This is a simple support that can be provided at holiday meals as well, no matter where your meal is!
- Repeated exposure of the selected food should be provided once or twice a day, with no expectations attached (Wheeler, 2019).
- Pairing the exposure with music, people, or movies the child already has a positive association to may be helpful.

How to Help Your Child Tolerate the Social Setting

Some children with autism may be able to tolerate the food at a holiday meal but unable to tolerate the social setting. Sitting at a formal table and eating with people they don't see often, may be difficult for many reasons. The new situation and less familiar people may increase their anxiety. The social demands of conversation at the table may prove difficult as well as the sensory challenges of sitting still for an entire meal. The following supports may be helpful for these children:

- Frequent review of family photos to increase familiarity and predictability at holiday gatherings.
 - Watch past family videos to increase familiarity and predictable of family members.
 - Provide social scripts or conversation starters to use during mealtime.
 - Provide an alternative, less overwhelming area for your child to eat.
- My daughter, who is typically developing, has needed this type of support at holiday meals in the past.

Alternative Meals Are Okay

Lastly, some children may need an alternative meal for the holidays, and that is okay! If an alternative meal makes the entire situation and event less stressful for you and your child, it's an acceptable support. Remember the more positive and less stressful the holidays are the more regulated your child will be at the next gathering. We have to meet our children where they are and provide the supports they need to experience success.



Throwing them in the deep end and watching them drown will not make the situation easier the next time around. With that being said, it's equally important we don't avoid the situation entirely. It's better to go for a small portion of the gathering and allow your family to experience success than to avoid it completely.

Avoidance tricks the brain that the situation is scary and reinforces the fear. Arm yourself with knowledge and reassurance to make the most out of your holiday gatherings. Hopefully this article can decrease the dread and stress you may feel regarding holiday mealtime.

<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/picky-eaters-during-holiday/>



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AUTISM AND THE HOLIDAYS: 10 TIPS

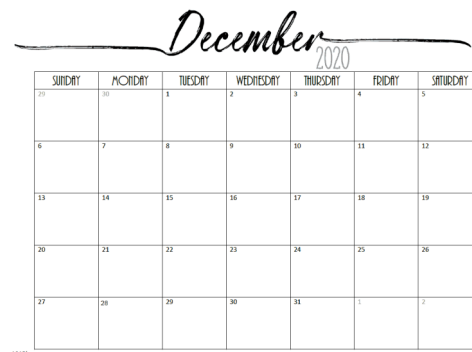
Autism and the Holidays: 10 Tips on How to Prepare

How to have a peaceful holiday season with autism.

The holidays are a wonderful time for many families. But for those families with children or adults on the autism spectrum, the holidays can also be a more stressful time. I have a child who has autism spectrum disorder. She is now 15 years old. I know personally and professionally what the holidays are like when you are caring for a child with ASD. As autism is a wide spectrum, stereotyping the holidays for families is not completely possible. However, most families do have similar frustrations and difficulties. In order to prepare for these more constructively, here are some tips.

Prepare.

The first step is to go over with your child the time or dates of holiday activities. Place these on a calendar in writing or using pictures. Repetitively discuss these dates and the specific activities in order to mentally prepare your child so they know what to expect. Preparing your child for change is key as those with ASD depend upon routines. They can become overwhelmed, anxious, or agitated with unexpected changes. The holidays for most of us are filled with changes and differences, even in everyday routines. The loss of even the normal school schedule is typically enough to cause problems for many children. Creating social stories that discuss upcoming activities and how to behave during these changes, can decrease stress levels for the person with ASD.



Prepare your child for decorations that may be going up in your home and try to include those that your child likes. Do not assume that the changes in the home will not bother your child.

Keep routines as similar as possible.

It is important to maintain regular routines and schedules as much as possible, even if you are traveling. These may include mealtimes, bedtime routines, hygiene schedules, and many others. As most children with ASD have sensory issues and are picky eaters, try to have the same foods available. This will provide some "sameness" and comfort. Also, have your child's favorite sensory objects or toys available.

Maintain reasonable expectations.

Your child is likely to have some autism meltdowns or tantrums related to changes and stressors inherent in the holidays. Understand that the importance of the holiday for your child is that he/she enjoys it and not that he/she enjoys it in the same exact way everyone else enjoys the holiday.

Be prepared to advocate for your child with family members.

Family members, especially those not around your child regularly, may give unsolicited advice. Plan a statement on how you will handle this, politely. Keep in mind, that they do not know what it is like to raise a child with ASD.

Be prepared to deal with repetitive statements or behaviors regarding the gift(s) your child wants.

Children with ASD often have a lot of anticipatory anxiety. One of the ways they may deal with this is by repetitively discussing the expected gift. Plan a way to limit how often they can ask for the gift. This may be a limited amount of time or a limited number of times they can discuss the gift.



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AUTISM AND THE HOLIDAYS: 10 TIPS CONTINUED...

Practice how to open gifts.

Opening gifts can be overwhelming and stressful for those on the autism spectrum. They may need to walk away in between gifts or open gifts much more slowly, maybe even over days. If there will be a formal opening of gifts in front of others, then practice how to wait while others open gifts too, as well as what to say or how to behave if they get an undesirable gift.

Plan a safe or calm space.

Teach them how and when to access the calm space if he/she gets overwhelmed during the holidays, especially when extra family is around. Your child should know exactly where this space is ahead of time and how to let you know he/she needs to access this place. If you notice signs your child is getting stressed, then take him/her to the calm space promptly and calmly. As you know best what your child likes, plan ahead to have in this space music or toys that typically help calm your child.



Make traveling less painful by planning.

If flying, notify the airport or airline of your child's ASD so that they can let you know what accommodations they offer. Rehearse travel if possible by attending special autism programs at the airport or by using pictures and/or social stories. Whether driving or flying, have familiar toys or preferred items available at all times. This can help to calm stressful situations. Prepare your child for unexpected delays by using social stories or other communication systems.

Prepare family members.

Educate family members about your child. Discuss strategies with them beforehand that are helpful to calm your child when they become anxious or overwhelmed. This should especially include whether or not your child likes to be hugged. Family members should know how your child best communicates and what kind of interactions they prefer. Should your child become anxious, it is helpful to prepare your family to remain calm and neutral to minimize behavioral outbursts. Furthermore, as you know your child better than anyone else, it is best to not allow other family members to discipline your child. They may reinforce bad behaviors unintentionally.

Enjoy the holidays yourself.

Trying to pre-plan for every situation and be on guard for your child can be exhausting. Do your best to personally spend time with family. You may need to ask a family member to offer some brief respite. If you have a spouse or partner, then you should trade off responsibilities.

I wish you a peaceful holiday season and a happy New Year.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/caring-autism/201912/autism-and-the-holidays-10-tips-how-prepare>



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TIPS FOR USING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY DEVICES CONTINUED...

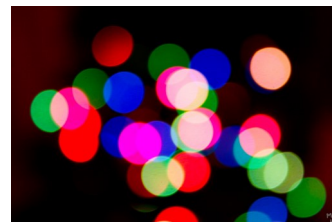
16 Tips for Enjoying the Holidays With an Autistic Child

Smart ways to save your holidays By Lisa Jo Rudy

Holidays can be tough for children with autism. They may be even tougher on their parents and siblings. But the good news is that for every problem you might encounter, there are real-world solutions you can put in place to make the season bright!

SENSORY ISSUES

Many people with autism have strong negative reactions to bright lights, loud noises, strong flavors and smells.¹ The holidays can sometimes feel like a sensory assault! When you're facing the probability of a sensory meltdown, here are some strategies to try:



Avoid the sensory challenges. Do you really need to take your child shopping with you, or could you possibly shop online, find a sitter, or ask someone else to pick up some items for you? These days, Internet options are just as good as in-person shopping; you can even get the grocery store to deliver.

Choose sensory-friendly options. While flashing lights on a Christmas tree might overwhelm your child, gently changing lights might charm him. Luckily, modern LED Christmas lights offer multiple ways to enjoy the twinkling. You can also, in many cities, find "sensory friendly" Santa's, shops, and other holidays offerings. If these aren't available in your hometown, consider having a small, low-key "visit from Santa" in your own home.

Have a plan B in case of sensory overload. Some children can handle crowds and noise, but only for a limited amount of time. If you decide to take your autistic child to a big holiday event, be sure to have an alternate "plan B" just in case it turns out to be too much for him. If it's just the two of you, you can simply leave. If other siblings or friends are coming along, know in advance which adult will take your autistic child out of the difficult situation while others can stay and enjoy the experience.

NEED FOR ROUTINE AND PREDICTABILITY

Most kids with autism thrive in situations that are consistent and predictable.² The holidays, of course, are precisely the opposite. Many families welcome new people, new sounds, new smells, new things in the house, and major changes to routines of eating, sleeping, and playing. How can you help your autistic child enjoy these special annual experiences?

1. **Pick and choose.** Most people with autism can handle some change to their routines, but very few can flexibly handle complete disruption. Knowing your child as you do, you can pick and choose the kinds of changes he or she can handle most easily. For example, you may decide to put up a tree but stay at home at Christmas, or travel for Christmas but pack along your child's favorite toys and videos and stick to his usual schedule.

2. **Practice.** If you're heading for a special event or experience, plan and practice behaviors ahead of time so your child is ready to handle something new. For example, if you're going to church for Christmas services, take your child to the decorated church at a quiet time. Talk with the minister or priest about songs and prayers to expect. How will the Christmas service be the same as or different from other services? If there's an order of service, share it and walk through it with your child. And, as always, have a Plan B just in case your child can't make it through the entire service.

3. **Say "no thanks" when necessary.** You're invited to a holiday party and the "whole family" is asked to come. It'll be crowded and loud, and it will keep your child up past bedtime. In cases like this, the best option is usually to just say no (or to hire a sitter if that's a practical option).

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TIPS FOR USING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY DEVICES CONTINUED...

COPING WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

Holidays are especially tough with extended family. That's because every family has traditions and expectations, and few families really understand the special needs of an autistic child. Your mom may feel hurt that your child doesn't like her cranberry sauce, while your dad can't figure out why he doesn't want to watch the football game. Your sister may be angry because your child won't play with his cousins, while your brother is sure your child just needs a little "tough love." How can you cope with so many challenges and expectations, all at the same time?

1. **Pre-plan and stick to your guns.** You already know which traditions are going to create problems, and you probably have a good idea about how your child will react to each one. Knowing all this, you can make a plan ahead of time and share it with family. The key, of course, is that you'll have to stick to your plan even when family members would rather you didn't. For example, you may need to say "we'll be delighted to open Christmas presents with you in the morning, but then Bobby needs downtime until dinner." You may even need to firmly tell family members that you will stay in a hotel rather than joining cousins at Grandma's house for the weekend.
2. **Bring your own necessities.** If you're leaving home for the holidays, don't assume that anyone else will have what your child needs to maintain his or her equilibrium. Bring along a DVD player and videos. Pack your child's favorite foods, blankets, pillow, and other paraphernalia.
3. **Explain your child's needs.** Before your mom has a chance to get hurt feelings, be sure she understands that, for example, your child is on a gluten-free diet, or won't eat new foods, or will love a Christmas present provided it's exactly the toy he's expecting and nothing else. Help extended family by giving them some hints and tips about how best to reach out to and include your child (and you) by modifying expectations, choosing specific foods, or turning on particular TV shows.
4. **Help your family to help you.** Most families want to do all they can to make you and your child feel welcome, but they need to know what's helpful. Help them to help you! Let family members know which Christmas presents would be most welcome, which kinds of games and activities your child enjoys, and how to tempt your child with his favorite foods. If it's appropriate in your family, you can also ask for time off so that you, too, can enjoy time with relatives without your child in tow.
5. **Have an escape route.** Both you and your child need to know what will happen if you get too much of family fun. What will you tell your family, and where will you go to get away? Is there a quiet room available? If not, can you head home or to a hotel room?



MORE HOLIDAY TIPS

Here are a few more ideas for staying calm and happy during holidays on the autism spectrum.

1. **Keep it simple.** You have enough on your plate without having to become Martha Stewart too! Put up a tree, wrap some presents, and stick a turkey in the oven. You're done!
2. **Establish your own traditions.** Kids with autism love traditions, and so does everyone else. Try creating your own family traditions that are easy and fun for everyone, including your autistic child.
3. **Lower your expectations.** Sure, Christmas can be a time when family and friends get together for a joyous celebration. But it can also be a time of quiet contemplation, or mellow family afternoons, or even an evening in front of the TV watching favorite movies.
4. **Take care of your other kids.** If your autistic child has siblings, be sure they don't get pushed aside as you take care of your child with special needs. If there are traditions or experiences they love, they should get the chance to enjoy them. That may mean a little juggling and hard work, but your children will thank you!
5. **Take care of yourself.** It's easy to get so busy with your autistic child's needs that you forget your own. But, of course, your child's experience will depend a great deal on your own feelings of calm and seasonal joy. That means you, too, need a chance to experience your favorite holiday events, movies, and food. Call on the help of friends and family, if you need to, but be sure you get that special shot of holiday cheer that makes season bright!

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/holidays-with-an-autistic-child-4156462>

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BOOK REVIEW

Make Social and Emotional Learning Stick!: Practical Activities to Help Your Child Manage Emotions, Navigate Social Situations & Reduce Anxiety (2nd Edition)

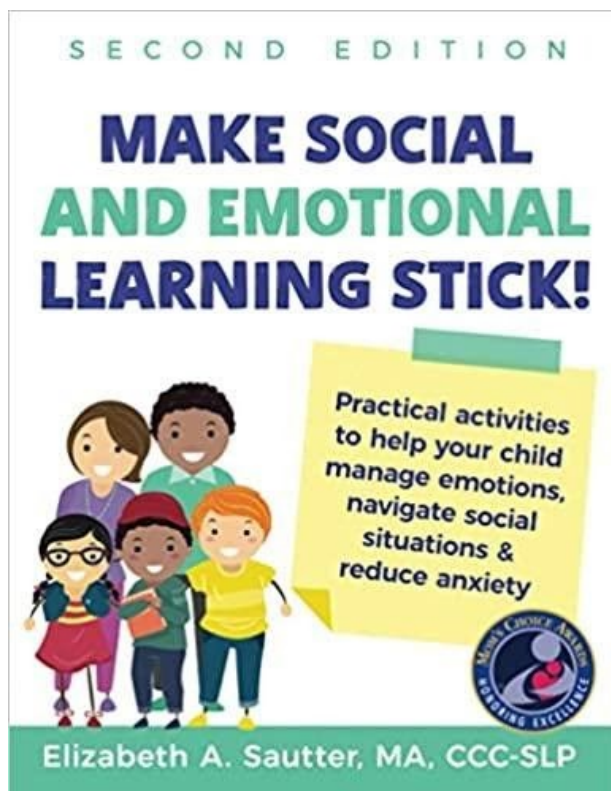
by Elizabeth Sautter

Does your child struggle to fit in, make friends, have social confidence, socialize, and navigate social situations - including the upcoming holidays? Does your child experience high levels of anxiety or BIG emotions with meltdowns that happen in the blink of an eye? If so, this Mom's Choice Award-winning book may be for you.

Celebrating holidays, getting ready for the day, preparing and eating meals together, reading time, going to the doctor, and partnering with your child's school become opportunities for discovery and practice of expected social behavior. These social and emotional skills activities, including new mindfulness practices and a new section on bridging home and school, are invaluable for busy or overwhelmed parents. When you have the tools you need to help your child, you can both become more calm, confident, and connected.

Make Social and Emotional Learning Stick offers practical ideas in a user-friendly structure with simple and fun activities that work on crucial skills:

- **Build conversation skills for better relationships**
- **Navigate transitions and boundaries, and try new things**
- **Focus on schoolwork instead of resisting or complaining**
- **Gain listening and mindfulness skills to build better friendships**
- **Identify hidden social rules that make social situations easier**
- **Learn empathy and how to see others' perspectives instead of just their own**
- **Develop tools to build resilience and emotional regulation, decrease anxiety, and much more!**



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AuTalkz

Holiday Memories



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