

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 National Autism Society, the Autism Society of Indiana, Riley Child Development Center, Easter Seals Crossroads, LOGAN Autism Learning Centers, 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 holiday events, or by creating a social story that highlights what will happen at a given event.
 - examples of numerous visual supports on our website at: <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/pages/visualsupports>.
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
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. On the second 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 help 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 be clear and concrete 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.
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 favourite 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 or some other signal** 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 favourite 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 (United-States) or Boxing Day (Canada). 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. If planning to attend a religious service, **pre-exposure to the environment** can be very beneficial for your child. When previewing the environment, practice routines that your child will likely encounter, such as kneeling, taking shoes off, sitting on benches, singing songs or praying. Religious services also mean having to sit for an extended period of time. It may be helpful to provide your child with a picture or written schedule of the program of events that you or your child can check off after each event is done. Fidgets and other quiet toys may be helpful to bring along to the service.
13. You might also choose to **practice certain religious rituals** throughout the holiday season. 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.

14. 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.
15. If your family member is on a **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.
16. 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, and other important routines.
17. 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.
18. **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/daughter's favourite foods are available during dinner. Again, this may not be the time to force them to try new foods.
19. 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.
20. 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. Equally important is to prompt family members about topics of discussion that they can engage your son/daughter in and those they should avoid.
21. **Holiday shopping** may be stressful for your child with ASD when stores are crowded and noisy. You may enlist your child to be in charge of the **list of presents or groceries**, and have them help you find the items and check them off. As a **reward**, the last item on the list can be a preferred item, such as a candy bar from the checkout aisle or their favourite food from the mall food court.
22. Holidays are a time for the whole family to enjoy, but it can be tricky to keep everyone happy. It is important to make sure that **siblings** are aware of how the holidays can be stressful for their brother or sister with autism. Parents can remind their child of their sibling's sensory issues, communication difficulties, or frustration tolerance and discuss with them how they can avoid potential triggers. While much of parents' attention will be focused on having a successful holiday for their child with autism, parents can ask siblings about their favourite holiday traditions to ensure that these activities are special for them.
23. **Adults with an ASD may want to purchase gifts for family members, friends, and co-workers**. Some individuals may need guidance in determining preferences of their family/friends in order to decide what would be an appropriate gift. These individuals may also need help budgeting for gifts and planning out the steps to purchase the gift, wrap it, and deliver it appropriately.
24. **Parties** are frequent during the holiday season and involve many social (and unwritten) rules. As such, it may be important for adults with an ASD to review social etiquette when invited to another person's home. For instance, perhaps he or she will need to check to see if they should remove their shoes at the door, or if they need to bring an appetizer, dessert, or any other small gift for the hostess. If the party is at work, some conversational topics might be off limits, and the expected dress code may be more formal. Therefore, it may also be beneficial to review what is appropriate for discussion or attire across different social settings.
25. **Adults with an ASD may have certain food sensitivities**. If so, it may be important for these individuals to remind families or coworkers what foods they find tolerable. In situations where these

individuals have no control over the menu, it will be important to plan ahead by either eating before a social gathering or packing a snack.

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!

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