



Christmas Guide for Autism

Christmas is a time for families and celebrations, the decorations and getting together, a time for love and laughter. However, for a family with children with ASD, it can be stressful with some children often becoming confused and distressed. There are many strategies for coping with this time of increased social activity and change in routine, although not every suggestion will work for everyone. The following tips may be adapted to suit your particular child.



Make a Plan

Use a calendar to highlight when Christmas is, when school finishes, when decorations will be put up and taken down. Use the schedule to count down the days to when different things are happening and explain what will happen to the best of your knowledge.

Be adaptable

Remember that your child may not see Christmas in the way that you or others do. It may be frightening or unnerving for them. Don't put too much pressure on yourself or your child to conform to the usual Christmas rituals. Do what is comfortable for you both and include your child in your plans for family activities.

Don't overdo it

Think about what you really have to do and what you can do without. Does Christmas have to be throughout the house or can you create Christmas free zones, do you really need a Santa visit for a photo or will a home photo by the tree do? Watch out for possible sensory overload through candles, decorations, lights, food and Christmas crackers.

Involve your child

Even if this just means being in the room when decorations are put up it may ease the transition. If they need to be actively involved, give them a specific job to do. Try spreading decorating out over a few days, e.g. maybe put the tree in place for a few days before you decorate it.

Christmas free zone

Create a room your child can go to and get away from Christmas, to be themselves and escape overload situations. This will also allow you to monitor your child's anxiety levels and help you to adapt to the needs of your child.

Remember siblings

Christmas is a time for all the family and time needs to be put aside for your other children. Schedule this time, maybe when your autistic child can spend time on a lone activity in the Christmas free zone.

Planned shopping

Set the parameters of your shopping before you go, list the shops you are going to in order and try not to deviate from it if possible. Schedule activities into your shopping that your child enjoys. If your child struggles with sensory overload in shops, earplugs, music with headphones etc or dark glasses may help.

Santa visits

If you decide to do this, try to book in advance. Contact the shopping centre and talk to them about the issues your child has, most will be willing to accommodate you in some way by giving a scheduled appointment or seeing you at the start or the end of the day to minimise waiting time.

Plan your presents

Allow your child to discuss when presents are opened. This could be to a schedule or when they feel ready, maybe when they are on their own or before or after their siblings. If your child doesn't cope with surprises, try using a clear wrap for their presents or no wrapping at all. Make sure toys are ready to use, batteries inserted, tags removed, computer games loaded. Give your child some phrases to say in response to a present e.g. "thank you for the gift".

Plan for normal

Schedule the time when things will go back to the child's regular routine, mark on the calendar when the decorations will come down, when the child will return to school etc. Use photos to remind your child what the house usually looks like and set a defined end to the festive period.

While this is not an exhaustive list of coping strategies, with your knowledge of your child's strengths and weaknesses, at least some of these may be adapted to help make the festive period a happy and joyous occasion for your whole family.

This information has been adapted from "A guide to the festive season for parents and caregivers of children with Autism" produced by the National Autistic Society, UK

By Daniel Smith, a man with ASD who has children with Asperger Syndrome.

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