



Making the Holidays Happy for Children with ASD



Preparatory Activities

- Social stories- gift opening, family dinner, Christmas decorations
- Practice opening gifts and provide a social script, incorporating “think it, don’t say it” strategies
- Visual schedule of the holiday plans and go over this every day
- Have photos of those people who you will be seeing during the holidays
- Keep to regular routines as much as possible

A sample social story

- People give me gifts at Christmas to show me that they care about me and want me to feel happy
- Sometimes I might receive a gift that I do not like
- Sometimes I might receive gifts that are things I already have
- If this does happen, I will still say “thank-you” and I will talk about it with my Dad when the gift-giver is not around

Preparatory Activities

- Talk to family or friends before they arrive or before your visit, about your holiday survival plan
- Don't assume anything, explain everything, even to the adults
- One family chose to do this in letter form
- Collect a list of all of the possible symbols of the traditions you will celebrate and directly discuss each and every one. Your child may have a lot of questions or unspoken fears

Environmental Strategies

- Simplify Christmas decorating
- Have only one room as the “Christmas room”
- Try to have the celebrations at your own home if possible to minimize disruptions
- Set a schedule that is manageable for the family, e.g., Decide to do only one outing, either Christmas Eve or Christmas day.
- Prioritize events and only do the most important ones

Environmental Strategies

- Gradually decorate the house allowing your child to be the helper
- Be aware of sensitivities to sound smells, lights when decorating
- Pre-plan a quiet place for your child to retreat when he is starting to get overloaded
- Bring a portable DVD player or Ipod so that your child can chill out with his familiar music or DVDs

Environmental Strategies

- Use cellophane or gift bags to wrap gifts
- Consider having your child open their presents one a day during the holidays to prevent them from being overwhelmed and to help them to appreciate each one
- Warn your relatives not to be disappointed at your child's reaction to their gifts
- Tag team with your spouse or other helpers and make sure that that person knows he/she is in charge of your child (don't assume everyone is watching)

More Environmental Strategies

- Bring earplugs or ear defenders to block the noise (maybe for the adults)
- Bring a sensory fidget bag (koosh balls, vibrating pen etc.)
- If your child is a picky eater, then bring his own food. This is not the time for food battles.
- If staying over night, bring child's own sheets and blankets

Other tips

- Keep your things packed and by the door so you can make a quick exit
- Try to leave when things are still going well
- If you can, bring two cars so one parent can stay at the party with siblings who may want to stay longer

More tips

- Give your child a job to do when company is there. He can be the official photographer or videographer, or pass out treats.
- Consider ordering a ready-made Christmas dinner
- Get rid of all packaging prior to wrapping a toy to prevent frustration and also put batteries in where required
- Keep a pair of scissors handy to cut itchy tags off of clothing gifts right away

Self-Care for parents

- Remember that if you feel stressed, your child likely feels double your stress
- Take a good, hard look at your expectations. If your expectations are too high then you are setting yourself up to be stressed and disappointed.
- Accept help whenever it is offered and tell the person exactly what you need
- Get a sitter and spend at least one night out with adults only
- Take a look around you and count your blessings

Resources

- <http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art47638.asp>
- <http://www.danasview.net/holiday1.htm>
- <http://www.autism-blog.net/2007/11/handling-autism-related-meltdowns.html>
- http://www.examiner.com/blogs/Autism_Awareness/2007/12/7/Autism-and-the-Holidays
- http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=holiday_tips&JServSessionIdr012=bfzgcld453.app23a&printer_friendly=1
- <http://www.autismvox.com/what-do-you-want/>
- http://www.swscedservices.org/pages/uploaded_files/Holidaytips.doc