

Happy Holidays!

Reducing Holiday Stress

For Families of Children with Autism

Holidays can be stressful and over-stimulating for anyone, but particularly so for children with autism. Here are some helpful strategies to lessen your child's anxiety and increase your family's enjoyment of the holiday season:



Decorating

- Decorate in gradual stages, rather than changing everything at once.
- Allow your child to interact with the decorations and help put them in place.
- Flashing lights or musical decorations can disturb some children. To see how your child will respond, experience these items in a store or someone else's home first.



Shopping

- Last minute holiday shopping can be stressful for children who rely on routines.
- If you do take your child shopping, allow enough time to gradually adapt to the intense holiday stimuli that stores exhibit this time of year. Take advantage of "Sensory Friendly" times that stores offer.



Family Routines

- Meet as a family to discuss how to minimize disruptions to established routines and how to support positive behavior when disruptions are inevitable.
- Prepare a photo album in advance of relatives and guests who your child will see on the holidays.
- Continue using behavior support strategies during the holidays. Try social stories to help your child cope with changes in routine, and visual supports to help prepare for more complicated days.
- Try using a visual schedule or calendar if you are celebrating the holidays on more than one day (e.g., Hanukah) to show when there will be parties/gifts and when there will not. Advent calendars are great visual countdowns to Christmas.
- Look for quiet, calm spots for your child to escape from crowds, chaos and music to relieve stress and anxiety.



Gifts

- If you put gifts under the Christmas tree, prepare well ahead of time by teaching that gifts are not to be opened without the family there. Give your child a wrapped box and a reward for keeping it intact.
- Wait until just before the holiday to set out gifts, especially large tempting ones.

- When opening gifts as a family, try passing around an ornament to signal whose turn it is to open the next gift. This helps alleviate disorganization and the frustration of waiting.



Play Time

- Prepare siblings and young relatives to share their new gifts with others.
- If necessary, consider giving your child a quiet space to play with his/her own gifts, away from the temptation of grabbing at other children's toys.



Avoid Surprises

- Avoid abrupt changes in routine.
- Use visual schedules and allow time for processing when changes do occur.



Sensory Friendly Events

- Try out Sensory Friendly Holiday Events
 - Movies
 - Theatre (ex: Nutcracker, Silver Bells)
 - Santa
 - Chanukah parties
 - Check out SPEDCHILDMA for local sensory friendly holiday events.

