

*Tips from CLC Network consultant and author Barbara J. Newman.*

**Not Just Surviving the Holidays:** A guide for parents, grandparents, and friends to use while supporting persons with disabilities through this season of celebration and change.

While holidays often bring up those Hallmark memories for many of us, for some children and adults with disabilities, holidays signal an intense time of stress and distress. Often communicated with significant behavior changes, the underlying message might be "I'm overwhelmed", "You changed my schedule", "Why did you put a tree in our living room", "There are too many people stuffed into this room", or "I am on complete sensory overload".

While all of these ideas won't work with all people, here are some strategies for families and friends to try as you create a positive time of celebration for each family member.

1. Find some pictures of the celebration from last year. If it will be similar, put together a photo album or story of that event so that the individual can remember it in pictures and written words prior to attending a similar event this year.
2. Put together a schedule of events for your party. Whether in words and/or pictures, let the person know the planned order. Some individuals enjoy crossing off or removing the individual schedule items as they are completed.
3. Many times we redecorate or rearrange rooms to fit more people. If, for example, a larger group will be gathering at grandma and grandpa's house, consider setting it up a day ahead and visiting that room without people in it. Let the individual explore the changes without the added stress of people. Perhaps leave something on a chair or in a certain place so that you can "reserve a spot" for the event when you arrive. The individual will know to find that space or item to make a more comfortable entry.
4. Give that individual a "job" to do. Perhaps you could assign an individual to be the photographer, back massager, coffee or beverage server, greeter (be the first to arrive and assimilate guests more slowly – often a better choice for some persons), or card distributor. Many times, a helping role will not only use the gifts of an individual, but it gives the person a clear sense of what to do in that environment.
5. Designate a "safe zone". It might be helpful to show that family member a quiet and designated space in the home or building where there would be a calming and preferred activity. It might be a mini tramp, rocking chair, a favorite book, or quiet classical music in a more isolated space where one might be able to find a refuge if the senses get overloaded.

6. Who needs to know? Many times extended families get together, and yet cousins or friends may not really understand the individual with the disability. It might be helpful for parents or the person with the disability to send out a quick update to family members prior to an event that includes such topics as "How Brent has grown this year", "Activities and topics Brent enjoys doing or discussing", "Activities and topics to avoid with Brent", "Some things that Brent may really enjoy when we gather for Thanksgiving", "Some things that might be challenging for Brent at our Thanksgiving celebration" "Some gifts Brent might enjoy receiving" "Some gifts to avoid". Giving information in advance can be a powerful way to put people at ease while also arming well-meaning relatives with some quick strategies to try.

7. "It is better to give than to receive" – and many times we think our family member with a disability should only be the recipient of gifts, and not the giver. How important it is for all of us to have a chance to give. How can that person use an area of interest or gifting to provide something for others? Would it be the gift of a dance or song? Could that individual provide the cookies for dessert? Might that person enjoy a trip to a dollar store to pick out something for each guest or family member? What about a wall decoration or a note card for each guest with a favorite picture of an animal or area of interest? Find a way for that individual to also receive the joy of giving!

8. Think in advance of a way your family member can participate in the holiday traditions. How about singing? Could you have a colorful streamer or small rhythm instrument available so that a person without words could participate with movement? Be creative. Think of ways you have made the holiday meaningful and consider ways your family member with a disability may be involved.

Hopefully, some of these ideas will allow you to prepare in advance and begin to build some positive holiday experiences for each family member!