

Top Tips for Parents at Christmas

It may be the most wonderful time of the year for many students, but for those with social communication difficulties, Christmas can be fraught with challenges. An already confusing world suddenly sounds, looks and even smells different and familiar routines are overturned. As with all things, the three core principles of preparation, communication and support can help students manage the festive season. All children are different so not all the following tips will be relevant to your child. Select the ones that are helpful to your family situation.

Disruption to the usual routine

- Explain that at special times of year, people do things differently and that this is OK.
- Talk about Christmas time and what this means for your family. Look at family photos.
- Be alert for behaviour changes that might signal anxiety.
- Liaise with school regarding changes to routine and special events so that you can pre-warn at home.
- Be aware that the 'hype' of Christmas might present challenges in terms of sensory overload and changed behaviour. You may need to reduce 'incoming' by avoiding some places at busy times and by having TV free times.
- Make a calendar which shows everything that is coming up over the next few weeks. Highlight events as they approach and cross them off when they have finished.
- Incorporate a Christmas activity that they enjoy into their daily schedule, eg opening the advent calendar, or switching on the tree lights
- Include your child in small parts of the Christmas process (so as not to overwhelm them). Things like wrapping one or 2 presents or setting part of the table, while talking about the affairs surrounding these activities. This will help the child or teen to become familiar with the change and activity that will occur. This familiarity goes a long way in reducing the level of anxiety on the day. (Some people choose to avoid sensory overload, e.g. by adding only a few decorations each day).

Decorations

- Write a social story to explain why we make and display decorations at Christmas.
- Cut down on the amount of decorations you use if they cause sensory overload. Remember that for your child displayed Christmas cards count as decorations. Consider having some Christmas free areas of the house to allow for 'down time'.
- Involve the child in deciding where the decorations should go and involve them in putting the Christmas tree up. This will help to maintain a sense of being in control.
- If you use lights, choose settings that stay on all the time or only blink occasionally.



Special events

- **Pantomime Outing** - show pictures of the actors and set in advance. Visit the theatre when it's empty or look at it online. At the performance sit at the back where it is quietest and you can exit without interrupting the show. Some theatres do special shows for children with ASD.
- **Parties** - pre-prepare, stick to agreed timings and let your child attend part of an event if this is easier for them than coping with the whole thing. Be aware of sensitivities around food and noise.
- **Christmas dinner** - be aware of the sensory challenges this may present. Offer small amounts of new or different foods to try on separate plates.
- **Christmas shopping** - It is likely that this will not be an enjoyable experience due to the crowds, noise and general overload of busy shops. Shop online, go without the children, go to late night and 24 hour shops at quiet times. Lots of children with autism love catalogues!
- **Special clothes** - Party clothes, Christmas jumper days and people in costumes can present sensory and change of routine challenges. Plan with your child and compromise if necessary.

Father Christmas

- Read the story of St Nicholas to help older children understand why we have Father Christmas
- Decide what you are going to tell your child about Santa and teach them (maybe using a social story) how to talk about this appropriately so that they don't upset other children with a blunt comment.
- Be aware that for some children Santa is scary. Let them stand back if they feel more comfortable with this.

Family Gatherings

- Communicate with your family about what things might be a challenge for your child and how you manage them. You may need to ask people not to hug and kiss your child or bombard them with gifts.
- If possible, identify a safe zone wherever you go that your child can retreat to if feeling overwhelmed.
- If your child has food issues, communicate this to others so that they don't inadvertently give your child a 'treat' which triggers unwanted reactions.

Back to school

- Use the time after Christmas to reintroduce normal routines and in the few days before the new term starts, ensure bedtime routines are in place and that your child is pre-warned and prepared for the return to school.

Hopefully by planning ahead, you will be able to ensure that stresses and challenges are minimised, and that you and your family can have a very

Merry
CHRISTMAS

