



Autism@MaltbyCentre

Autism can be a difficult journey for children and parents. We're here to help with experience, advice and understanding. You have questions, we have answers. Reach out to us.



Parent's Guide to the Holiday Season

The Holiday Season for kids with autism can be different. Here's our Parent's guide to celebrating the season with autism in mind.

Set expectations ahead of time

Christmas is a time for traditions and celebrations. Tell the family and friends you are interacting with over Christmas about what kinds of things they can expect, and ask for their help. Maybe grabbing a seat in church an hour before the services might be a challenge. The kisses and hugs that Grandma expects might be too much of a sensory overload. Or the hoopla of opening presents on Christmas morning might be too stimulating. You know your kids better than anyone. Plan ahead and tell the people who you will be spending the holidays with about how to make your celebrations work for everyone, including those with autism. Ask for a little flexibility and understanding. Remind them, and yourself, that the Christmas Spirit is about inclusiveness as much as it is candy canes and stockings full of toys.



Pick the right time for activities

Everything and everyone is bustling at Christmas. Busy malls or busy Christmas parties can be a challenge for kids with autism. In your planning, think about how to manage the timing of your activities. Consider choosing event times that are less crowded. Build in times before and after for quiet time. And give your kids more of your time. Christmas to them is just as much about having time with you as it is opening toys.

Maintain routines

What young child hasn't thought of waiting up all night to see Santa deliver presents? That works in movies, but in real life the best thing to do over the holidays is to stick to the routines you have developed for your kids with autism. That includes bedtime, bath time and meals. Kids with autism like predictability. If there is a change in routine, let your child know ahead of time on your schedule and build in reminders.

Food

The best thing about Christmas is the food. But for some kids with autism following a special diet this can be a challenge. Let everyone who is celebrating the holidays with you know about any dietary needs your kids have. You know the consequences of dietary changes, but others don't. Well-meaning people think a child is missing out if they don't try all the Christmas treats. And even if there isn't a specific dietary issue, keep an eye out on what your kids eat. Too many sweets can be a problem for any kid.

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Visiting

Christmas is a time for visiting. Family, friends, neighbours. That can be a lot of people, and a challenge for parents with kids who have autism. If you're going visiting, think about limiting the length of the visit and make sure your child brings a few things that they find comforting. Ask your hostess where there is a quiet space available if your child needs it. And if people visit you, let them know that visits, especially unannounced ones, can be stressful. Ask that they call ahead and come at times that work for your family. Limit how long they stay ahead of time. Make the most of your visiting and visitors, but plan ahead.



Respite time

The Christmas holidays are the perfect time for some respite. Don't forget your needs as a caregiver. You could use with a break now and then. Find some time over the holidays for you time, or if you are a couple, some we time. Find someone you trust to take your kids for a while and do something that will recharge your batteries.

Santa Claus

Old Saint Nick can be a bit intimidating for a child who has autism. The traditional visit to see a Santa at the mall can be a sensory overload for many kids. Too much sounds, lights and people. Plan your Santa visits carefully and see if you can find experiences designed for kids with autism. If you can, find a "sensitive" Santa that has experience with kids who have autism.

Christmas presents

Some children with autism find Christmas presents overwhelming. Tearing off wrapping paper can be a challenge for those with fine motor issues. Some children might feel anxious not knowing what's inside. Consider putting presents in gift bags or get them unwrapped. You can put a picture on the outside of the present to give them an idea what to expect. And if you're giving a toy that comes well-packaged consider opening it beforehand and putting it together. That way, your child will get something to interact with immediately and won't have to wait for you to help them open and assemble it. For electronic things, don't forget batteries. And for computer or online games, try getting them loaded and ready to go before the big day.



Find your own rhythm

Christmas is different for every family. Younger children who still believe in Santa Claus are different than teens. The best person to figure out what your family needs this Christmas is you. Take the time to plan what you can. Think through what you will do and how you will do it. Don't forget about the power of familiar things and predictability for your kids. But don't let that stop you from carefully introducing new ideas, things and people. Believe in yourself and your kids, and have fun. That's the best advice for any Christmas.



Find out more information at our website

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