

Twelve Tips for Helping People with Autism and Their Families Have a Happy Holiday

While many happily anticipate the coming holiday season, families of people on the autism spectrum also understand the special challenges that may occur when schedules are disrupted and routines broken. Our hope is that by following these few helpful tips, families may lessen the stress of the holiday season and make it a more enjoyable experience for everyone involved. The following tips were developed with input from the Autism Society, the Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Easter Seals Crossroads, the Sonya Ansari Center for Autism at Logan and the Indiana Autism Leadership Network.

1. Preparation is crucial for many individuals. At the same time, it is important to determine how much preparation a specific person may need. For example, if your son or daughter has a tendency to become anxious when anticipating an event that is to occur in the future, you may want to adjust how many days in advance you prepare him or her. Preparation can occur in various ways by using a calendar and marking the dates of various holiday events, or by creating a social story that highlights what will happen at a given event.

2. Decorations around the house may be disruptive for some. It may be helpful to revisit pictures from previous holidays that show decorations in the house. If such a photo book does not exist, use this holiday season to create one. For some it may also be helpful to take them shopping with you for holiday decorations so that they are engaged in the process. Or involve them in the process of decorating the house. And once holiday decorations have been put up, you may need to create rules about those that can and cannot be touched. Be direct, specific and consistent.

3. If a person with autism has difficulty with change, you may want to gradually decorate the house. For example, on the first day, put up the Christmas tree, then on the next day, decorate the tree and so on. And again, engage them as much as possible in this process. It may be helpful to develop a visual schedule or calendar that shows what will be done on each day.

4. If a person with autism begins to obsess about a particular gift or item they want, it may be helpful to be specific and direct about the number of times they can mention the gift. One suggestion is to give them five chips. They are allowed to exchange one chip for five minutes of talking about the desired gift. Also, if you have no intention of purchasing a specific item, it serves no purpose to tell them that maybe they will get the gift. This will only lead to problems in the future. Always choose to be direct and specific about your intentions.

5. Teach them how to leave a situation and/or how to access support when an event becomes overwhelming. For example, if you are having visitors, have a space set aside for the child as his/her safe/calm space. The individual should be taught ahead of time that they should go to their space when feeling overwhelmed. This self-management tool will serve the individual into adulthood. For those who are not at that level of self-management, develop a signal or cue for them to show when they are getting anxious, and prompt them to use the space.

(5.) For individuals with more significant challenges, practice using this space in a calm manner at various times prior to your guests' arrival. Take them into the room and engage them in calming activities (e.g., play soft music, rub his/her back, turn down the lights, etc.). Then when you notice the individual becoming anxious, calmly remove him/her from the anxiety-provoking setting immediately and take him/her into the calming environment.

6. If you are traveling for the holidays, make sure you have their favorite foods or items available. Having familiar items readily available can help to calm stressful situations. Also, prepare them via social stories or other communication systems for any unexpected delays in travel. If you are flying for the first time, it may be helpful to bring the individual to the airport in advance and help him/her to become accustomed to airports and planes. Use social stories and pictures to rehearse what will happen when boarding and flying.

7. Know your loved one with autism and how much noise and activity they can tolerate. If you detect that a situation may be becoming overwhelming, help them find a quiet area in which to regroup. And there may be some situations that you simply avoid (e.g., crowded shopping malls the day after Thanksgiving).

8. Prepare a photo album in advance of the relatives and other guests who will be visiting during the holidays. Allow the person with autism access to these photos at all times and also go through the photo album with him/her while talking briefly about each family member.

9. Practice opening gifts, taking turns and waiting for others, and giving gifts. Role play scenarios with your child in preparation for him/her getting a gift they do not want. Talk through this process to avoid embarrassing moments with family members. You might also choose to practice certain religious rituals. Work with a speech language pathologist to construct pages of vocabulary or topic boards that relate to the holidays and family traditions.

10. Prepare family members for strategies to use to minimize anxiety or behavioral incidents, and to enhance participation. Help them to understand if the person with autism prefers to be hugged or not, needs calm discussions or provide other suggestions that will facilitate a smoother holiday season.

11. If the person with autism is on special diet, make sure there is food available that he/she can eat. And even if they are not on a special diet, be cautious of the amount of sugar consumed. And try to maintain a sleep and meal routine.

12. Above all, know your loved one with autism. Know how much noise and other sensory input they can take. Know their level of anxiety and the amount of preparation it may take. Know their fears and those things that will make the season more enjoyable for them.

Don't stress. Plan in advance. And most of all have a wonderful holiday season!