

# 10 Tips for a More Enjoyable Family Holiday When Your Child Has Special Needs

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We often put pressure on ourselves to make the holidays perfect – which just isn't realistic. In the end the most important thing to remember is that the holidays are a time to cherish one another and the joy of being together. Whether you are scaling back or starting new traditions remember to celebrate in a way that makes sense for YOUR family!

## TIP #1

Be Prepared– Getting your child ready for the holidays can occur in many different ways.

- Use a calendar – mark the dates that special events are happening.
- Make a social story – specific to your child describing the expectations
- Create a short video – can even be done on your phone.
- Make a photo album of past holidays.

## Tip #2

Decorating –

We may not realize it, but changing the arrangement of the furniture or removing it to make room for a tree or a larger table can be very unsettling. Even just replacing everyday items with unfamiliar ones can have an effect on your child's behavior – especially if they like things the same all the time.

- Try to involve your child in the process – take out the decorations and label them – to get your child more familiar. Allow them to handle the items that aren't breakable.
- Decorate gradually – a few items each day instead of everything at once.
- Try splitting up the room – allowing adult things on one side and kid things on another.
- Allow them to decorate however they'd like – encouraging their creativity rather than placing additional demands

## Tip #3

Holiday shopping

Shopping with a child with autism can be challenging & even more so when the stores are crowded and noisy.

- Make a list rather than roaming the store to find the perfect gift or sale item
- Keep the trip short
- Have snacks & other detractors available
- Use First/Then language – **FIRST** we are going to buy gifts for Grandma & Grandpa **THEN** we are going to the park/McDonald's

#### Tip #4

Attending Holiday Services –places of worship can be intimidating – even more so when they are very crowded & loud

- Visit during the week – when the building is quiet. Practice sitting quietly, kneeling and walking in the aisles.
- Locate the bathroom in case you need it and see if there is a quiet space where they can take a break if needed.
- Take a picture of them in the different places – if they are going to a children’s service away from their parents. Use the photos to review with your child
- Choose the time of Service that might be less crowded or one that has a children’s program
- Practice religious rituals at home – prayers or songs that may engage your child
- Have noise cancelling headphones or earmuffs to help block out some of the noise  
if there is going to be loud music or singing & your child is sensitive to noise –

#### Tip #5

##### Quiet Area

Visiting or having company to your home can be overwhelming with noisy crowded rooms.

- Prepare a quiet area for your child. If you are visiting family or friends you should arrange this before you go.
- Bring items that your child is familiar with – special blanket, toy, music or books
- Show your child where this room is soon after you arrive so they are aware there is a place they can go if the environment becomes too stressful.
- Practice doing calming activities with them – play soft music, turn the lights down
- Be proactive – watch your child for cues that they may need a break. Suggest to them it may be a good idea to relax for a while.

## Tip #6

### Visiting Others

Prepare the people that you intend to visit by letting them know:

- If your child does or doesn't like hugs & kisses
- Your child may not want to take off their coat or wear uncomfortable dress clothes
- Some kids take more time to warm up to others and may need to seek out the quiet area
- Your child may prefer familiar foods rather than holiday specialties. It is best if you bring these items.
- Recruit help – ask a friend or family member to watch or interact with your child so you have time visit with family or attend to your other children.

### Staying overnight?

- Explain this to your child by
  - a. Showing them pictures of where they will be sleeping and tell them for how many nights
  - b. Telling them who else will be staying at the house.
  - c. Describing what the routine will be while you're there. For example:  
Can they eat on the couch or is it table only – things like that
- Bring familiar items like pillows, blankets, toys or music from home that may be comforting.

## Tip #7

Food – many children with autism are very selective in what they will eat.

- Bring food from home if your child has a limited food repertoire. The holiday table is not the place to require your child to eat unfamiliar or less preferred food. Pick your battles
- Prepare your child for the holiday meal by fixing & trying some of the specialties at home in the weeks before
- Practice saying “no thank-you” or “I don't care for that” instead of YUK or EWW
- Allow your child to smell different spices that may be used in holiday cooking such as pumpkin, cinnamon or peppermint to get them used to scents that are less familiar

## Tip #8

Having a big family dinner?

- Set the table a few days ahead and put the picture of each person where they will be sitting. Practice their names or who goes with who Aunt Sue goes with... – so when it comes time to sit down & eat they are familiar with who is at the table.

## Tip #9

Gifts – Often a child with autism doesn't understand or like surprises. They may not be looking forward to the big parties and presents like your other children or extended family. People may become disappointed when they don't open a present or just leave it on the floor and walk away.

It may be a good idea to

- Practice gift giving – waiting their turn & responding appropriately
- Wrap some of your child's current toys & practice opening them up.  
– all year long we tell our children not to rip things up and not to damage pretty items & now we expect them to be able to do just that. So, a little practice can go a long way.
- Have a sibling or friend open the gift – take it out and respond appropriately. “Black Panther DVD – just what I wanted – thank you!” Or give a hug or a quick thumbs up.

## Tip #10

Preparing Siblings – the holidays are a time for the whole family – it's important to make siblings aware of how stressful this season may be for their brother or sister with autism.

- Before the holiday season begins – take the time to remind children of their sibling's communication difficulties, sensory issues, low frustration tolerance along with their likes or dislikes
- Talk about how we plan to handle these issues and what we will do if & when a meltdown happens.