

Autism and Christmas



For many of us, Christmas is an enjoyable time but for a lot of autistic people the Christmas period can be very challenging. The difference in routine, sensory overloading, and the unexpected changes that the festive season brings, can result in autistic people feeling anxious and unsettled.

We have put together a list of useful tips that we hope may help make this festive period less stressful, whilst recognising Christmas can look very different for everyone.

Calendars

Using a calendar throughout the festive period can help make things as predictable as possible for autistic individuals. A calendar can be used throughout the month of December and can include school plays, work events, dates for finishing school or work and dates for restarting. The change of routine from being out of school or work over the Christmas period can be difficult, therefore it can be helpful to plan and add activities to your calendar over the break to create some structure.

Decorations

When you decorate for Christmas, the environment will look different than it usually does throughout the year. This change can be overwhelming and hard to deal with for autistic individuals. It is important to include the autistic individual in the decorating process, not decorating the house when the

individual goes to bed, as they will wake up to a new environment. Instead, decorate gradually, giving them a choice out of a few items that they could put on the tree. The decorating process may take up to a week, but try and limit the decorations to one room so the rest of the house remains familiar. Additionally, taking pictures or videos of the decorating process can be helpful, meaning you can refer back to it next year during the preparation process.

Christmas presents

Many autistic people often struggle with the concept of presents and may only ask for one thing they really want. This can be hard to deal with but be mindful if you add in lots of unexpected extras they might get stressed. Opening lots of presents can be overwhelming, therefore it may be beneficial to open gifts throughout the day instead of all at once. When it comes to wrapping

gifts, sometimes using wrapping paper is an overwhelming sensory experience and many individuals may cope better with using gift bags instead. If there are lots of gifts and you are worrying that the individual may get overwhelmed, you could try wrapping gifts in clear cellophane or putting a photo of what is wrapped instead on the outside of the paper. Presents don't always have to be a surprise, being able to see what's wrapped up may help reduce some anxiety for the autistic individual.

When people receive presents, we expect them to react in a certain way and show the gift giver appreciation. Many autistic individuals don't put an emphasis on facial expressions. Therefore, it may appear that they are nonchalant about their gifts but in reality are very happy! If they are likely to say I already have this or I don't like it, it can be good to go over the concept using a social story or comic strip conversation. Autistic people tend to be more straight forward in their communication.

Christmas dinner

Many autistic individuals have sensory aversions to smells and taste, this can make having a Christmas dinner a stressful sensory experience. To avoid worry or struggles with this, focus on the fact it is just another dinner. For example, let the autistic individual use their normal plate or cup, and let them eat the food they would usually eat throughout the year. Additionally, it is important to remember that a decorative dining area may look or feel different, so they may wish to eat in a more familiar area.

Family visits

If you are visiting family or friends over the Christmas period, using a schedule can give a clear idea of where you are going, what you will be doing there, and how long you will be out.

If family are visiting your home, it can be useful to have a 'chill out' zone set up enabling the autistic person to retreat if things become too much. You could also create a calm down box for the Christmas break that may include things like sensory fidgets or ear defenders. If you are supporting an older autistic individual it may help to provide jobs to do when you have visitors, for example, they can assist you to get food and drinks ready.



Santa

The concept of Santa can be hard for autistic individuals to comprehend, as they are expected to go and meet a stranger, get their photograph taken, and permit someone in a big red suit to come down the chimney into their home. For logical thinkers the concept of Santa brings many questions such as, how can one man reach millions of homes in one night, how can he fit down the chimney and how come explorers have never found Santa's grotto in the North Pole. Overall, Santa can potentially make some people more anxious and as a family you can decide how you wish to deal with this.

We must assist them make sense of Christmas whilst helping them to feel safe and secure. If visiting Santa before Christmas will be too much why not go virtual? Websites like Portable North Pole will send a virtual personalised message to children or make use of the sensory friendly Santa visiting. Lots of shopping centres are now providing this. If the concept of Santa coming down the chimney is too much, Santa could write a letter promising to come in the front door and only go into the living room and then leave.

We ultimately want our children to enjoy Santa and the Christmas experience as much as possible and for the entire family to look forward to this special time of year.



Coping with the pressure of Christmas

Every family finds aspects of Christmas stressful whether it is hunting for a specific gift that is now sold out, the various Christmas events and outings that happen through December, or cooking the dinner. Try not to put too much pressure on yourselves as a family. Do you need to go to events you know will be very crowded and busy? Have you checked if they are running quiet sessions? Some places will allow you to fast track queues or have reserved seating at the back for regular breaks. Using an Autism NI membership card may allow this to be facilitated, ring ahead and double check with event organisers.

Talk to others about how they are managing Christmas, Autism NI facilitates Support Groups across Northern Ireland or you can call our Helpline for support (02890 401729, Option 1).

Overall, the key to an autism inclusive Christmas is to ensure that the autistic individual is central to all planning. Remember what Christmas means to your family, and recognise that how you will celebrate will be just as unique as everything else you do. Not everyone will do the same thing, or understand the way your family experiences Christmas, but this does not make your experience any less valuable.

Finally, take some time to relax and treat yourself.





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