



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 of America, the Indiana Resource Center for Autism 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 date 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.

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 5 chips. They are allowed to exchange one chip for 5 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, rather than having a behavioral episode, the individual should be taught ahead of time that they should go to their room when feeling overwhelmed. This self-management tool will serve the individual into adulthood.

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.

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 them while talking briefly about each family member.

9. Practice opening gifts, taking turns and waiting for others, or giving gifts to others. 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 they 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.

Our hope above all is that you will have a wonderful holiday season!

