

Planning for the Holidays

Preparing for the Holidays

There are things you can do in advance to prepare your child for the holidays.

1. A few weeks before your celebration, work out a menu with your friends/family that includes items that your child likes. Let your host know about any dietary restrictions your child has so that they may be accommodated.
 2. Role-play family meal times and practice greetings so your child is comfortable with the idea of meeting lots of family.
 3. Create a social story around what's going to happen. This could include details about where you are going, what you will be doing / seeing, people you will be meeting, and foods you may be eating.
 4. Explain to hosts beforehand what they can expect and what normal behavior is for your child. Discuss any special requests you may have, such as a quiet area for your child, or specific things you may need them to have in the house. This will avoid any last minute confusion that may arise once you are there.
 5. Practice opening presents, singing songs, or any other family traditions that may be new for your child.
 6. Pack your visual communication cards and any other visual supports that will make traveling easier for your child.
 7. Speak with your child's therapists about any ideas they may have to reduce the sensory overload your child may feel with loud noises, large gatherings and holiday travel. They might also have ideas for generalizing skills to new environments and people.
3. To help infrequently-seen family members seem more familiar, show your child pictures of people they will be seeing. If possible, try some video chats before the get-together.
 4. If your child's behavior is making someone uncomfortable, explain that it is normal and expected, and that they should ignore it as far as possible.
 5. Do not force your child to participate in family games or other traditions if they do not want to. Allowing them to observe what is happening may be helpful so that they know what to expect next year as long as it is not causing them sensory distress. You can always find an alternative activity for them to do if need be. If you have videos of these activities from past years, share them with your child beforehand.
 6. If you can think of a family activity that your child will love, suggest it to the family.
 7. Help other parents in the family prepare their children for what to expect and how to play with your child. Videos and video chats are very useful.
 8. Be prepared for possible changes in your child's routine. It's harder to stick to a routine when you are visiting someone or when you have house guests. Although this may be difficult for your child, prepare them for it by using visual communication tools and social stories.

Traveling

Traveling can be hard on just about anyone. For a child with autism, traveling presents its own set of challenges. Here are some things you can do to make the traveling a little easier.

1. If traveling by air, contact the airline and let them know about any special needs you may have -- including special dietary needs, and any special equipment you need to carry on board.
2. Pack some of your child's preferred items for the journey. Special toys, electronics, blankets etc. can all make the unfamiliar surroundings more comfortable for your child.
3. Create a social story around the TSA security check procedures. This can be one of the hardest parts to get through, as often a child is separated from their favorite toy and may be required to remove their shoes or coats.
4. Let your TSA officer know about your child's disabilities. You can talk to them about how to work with your child to avoid a meltdown.
5. For road trips, work out a route and all the places you can stop to rest and stretch if your child does not like to sit for long periods. Consider driving when your child might nap or sleep to make the journey less arduous for them.
6. Pack plenty of snacks and drinks.

Family Gatherings

1. Practice greetings and social scripts with your child so that they know what to expect and how to respond.
2. Inform your family if your child is uncomfortable with physical affection such as hugs or kisses. Let them know in advance, so that they know not to make your child uncomfortable.

Holiday Meals

Holiday meals can be fun with a little preparation by you and cooperation from your friends and family.

1. If you don't think that your child will be able to eat the food that is going to be served at a meal, bring your own food, and explain this to the host. They will be prepared and be less likely to take offense.
2. Designate a safe and quiet place for your child to relax as needed. If they are not used to sitting at the table with everyone, reward them for any time spent at the table during meal time, and allow them to escape to their quiet spot as needed.
3. If your child is uncomfortable or stressed, excuse yourself and find a spot where you can comfort your child and offer an alternative activity for them.

Holiday Shopping and Crowded Spaces

1. Choose a time of day when your child will have the most energy.
2. Give your child an identity card with your name and number if you are worried about wandering off.
3. Many malls offer appointments for character visits for children with special needs.
4. Take frequent breaks, plan for meals and snacks in advance which will all help to avoid meltdowns.
5. It may be easier to plan shorter, more frequent trips than one long trip.

We hope you have found these tips helpful. Holidays are meant to be a fun time, and with a little preparation, you can make them more comfortable for your child.