



Empower Autism

Holiday Recommendations

The holidays are not always easy for people on the autism spectrum. Holiday parties, lengthy meals with relatives, crowded houses, and gift-anxiety can be really stressful for people on the spectrum. The behavior expectations are different, and familiar adults are often acting unpredictably, and generally have less time to patiently explain what is going on. Quiet alone-time is at a premium for everyone, and most people are a little edgy. In fact, sometimes the holidays are not a 'holiday' at all for people with autism. Here are a few tips that may diffuse some holiday drama in your family.

Structure in the Home

- Post a calendar for your child. On the calendar, mark school-days, non-school days, major holiday events, visiting relatives, travel, and other events of importance (to the child).
- Use a daily schedule, even if you usually don't. Holidays are full anxiety, and your child will probably appreciate having a schedule to depend on—even if it just subtly posted somewhere obvious.
- Consider making and posting a list of leisure activities your child can do (they can help you make it) in various areas of the house. Then you can help them structure long periods of leisure time by writing stuff like 'living room choice', 'play room choice', on their schedule.

Setting Expectations

- If you would like your child to behave differently than they usually do, write down your new expectations, and go over them calmly, about a day before you want the child to act differently. Go over them again (using the written list) right before the new expectations go into effect.
- Don't be afraid to reward your child for good behavior. If you are going to use a reward, write down what it will be, and what it is for. Use the system above to communicate your reward system.

Preparation for Big Events

- Remind your family (kindly, gently) that your child has autism, and might not behave in ways that everyone expects. Some families find that a thoughtfully composed email works best. Specifically address the way your child might behave if they receive a gift they do not like, taste a food they don't like, get overwhelmed, don't know how to answer a question, or have to share something they weren't expecting to.
- Tell your child (in writing or in pictures) what the event will be like for them. Prepare them for the sensory experience, the crowd, the people etc.
- Make a plan with your child for what they should do if they need a quiet break. You might designate a quiet place at the event location where they can chill out, or a person they can ask to take them for a walk outside.

General Procedures

- Take the time to praise your child.
- Try your best to refrain from over-coaching, or nitpicking. This will keep both of you more relaxed.
- If your child needs more decompression time, or needs to stim, pace, rock, or whatever, find ways to give them that time.



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