



Handling the Holidays with ASD

For our children on the autism spectrum who love routine and predictability the holidays can be a stressful time of year. Decorations, social events, and time off from school are just a few of the things that may create increased anxiety, not only for the child with autism, but their families as well. Here are some quick tips to make the holidays smoother.

- 1) Prepare your child in advance. Use of visual supports like schedules and calendars can be extremely useful to help your child predict what will be happening. If your child has difficulty with concepts of time, an advent calendar will help them know when Santa will be arriving without having to ask a parent daily. By using a visual, the child can independently check to see the “countdown” as many times as they need. Making a December calendar with the sequence of holiday events from putting up the tree to visiting relatives, including noting days off from school, helps organize everyone in the family. See examples of numerous visual holiday supports on the Indiana Resource Center for Autism’s website at: <http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageId=3613>.
- 2) Establish routines through traditions. One way to help ease into once-a-year events while building family traditions is to make a picture book about the holidays. By taking several pictures of each event that will reoccur each year, you can make a simple picture story for each event. These can include everything from decorating a Christmas tree to putting out cookies and milk for Santa. Your holiday picture book can be reviewed each year before and during the holidays to help your child navigate through the changes during the season.
- 3) Rein in perseveration. With all the excitement about gifts your child may become “stuck” on talking about a specific desired present. You can set parameters on the amount of time this is discussed by using tokens (such as poker chips or pennies). The child receives five tokens in the morning and can trade in a chip in order to talk about the desired item for five minutes. Using the timer on your phone or oven helps everyone know when the five minutes is up.
- 4) Remember that you know your child best! When attending social events it’s okay to remind family and friends not to hug or pressure your child to speak or look at them. Gauge how much activity your child can tolerate before needing a break and plan where your child can go to regroup (another room, the car, a walk, etc). Be prepared to leave the event early. Consider arriving in two cars so a portion of the family can stay and the others leave if needed. Other suggestions can be found on Facebook through a site run by Bill Nason, MS LLP, a behavioral specialist, titled Autism Discussion Page.

Wishing you and all your loved ones a wonderful holiday and all the best in 2014!

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