



Approaching the Holidays with a Plan

The holidays can bring a number of unique social situations that you and your child need to navigate. The following tips are designed to help you manage stress and capitalize on the therapeutic opportunities you'll encounter.

Getting Ready

Don't expect holiday miracles. Changes in the environment can contribute to feelings of overwhelm and, as a result, you are likely to see more behavior problems or shutting down. Realize that progress at this time of year might look like a step back.

Prepare your child in advance. Use a well-placed calendar at school and home to show the sequence of holiday events including classroom parties, decorating, concerts, visiting relatives, and so forth. Be sure to use picture symbols for non-readers. A calendar is a fun way to count down the holidays and allows children to independently check "how many days?" as often as they need to. You can use sweets, small toys or pictures to mark the days.

Be proactive. Help older children plan for holiday challenges they may encounter including the rehearsal of events. Once they've identified likely rough spots or state changes they may encounter like becoming overwhelmed or angry, have them choose coping strategies they might use such as self-talk or deep breathing. While a reminder of the strategies picked is appropriate, trying to identify one in the middle of a heightened state is nearly impossible.

Let extended family members know what's helpful in advance by sending an email with tips specific to your family and child or with a link to a helpful article like this one (<http://www.familyconnections.org/puzzle-pieces-tips-for-the-extended-family-of-a-child-with-autism/>).

Provide a role model. Adults often find themselves overwhelmed by holiday-related schedule changes and sensory overload. Don't be shy about sharing that anxiety and also how you respond to it with flexibility. For instance, if travel plans prevent guests from arriving for dinner explain, "I'm disappointed that Grandma won't be here for dinner. Let's eat while we're hungry. We can have dessert together once she arrives."



Establish routines through traditions. Help ease into once-a-year events while building family traditions by making a picture book about the holidays. Take several pictures of each annual event and make a simple picture story. 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. Including seldom seen relatives in the photos will also give children a chance for reacquainting before actual arrivals.

Pick and choose events. Adults avoid burnout by politely declining some holiday events, and the same should be done for children. Perhaps greeting grandma and grandpa upon arrival is enough excitement, and staying home with a familiar sitter rather than joining the family for dinner out is an option. If special events during the school day are becoming overwhelming, perhaps an option to sit one out in a quieter area of the school is an alternative.

Trust your instincts! When attending social events, it's OK 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 you can go to regroup (another room, the car, a walk) or prepare to leave the event early. In the school setting, this may mean strategizing seating at a performance near an exit, or arriving before others file in or after everyone else has settled in their seat.

Teachable Moments

The holidays also provide a unique opportunity to help a child target pragmatic goals in a natural context. Consider the following:

Strengthen conversational skills. Often students with pragmatic challenges don't give listeners enough context to easily follow the conversation. This is another opportunity to create small photo books of current "hot" topics for the child—it may be a holiday "wish list" of hoped for gifts or might be a quick summary of a beloved story—whatever topic the child is revisiting frequently. This book can be used for rehearsal—reminding the child to include background information for the listener—or can be shared with an interested adult who now has a better idea of the topic and an easier way to formulate questions. Books have the added benefit of allowing joint attention without the pressure of eye contact. And because there tends to be a larger assortment of "new" listeners during the holidays, a child that tends to repeat stories will have an appropriate reason to do so in addition to the extra conversation practice.

Rein in perseveration. The excitement of gifts often results in a child "stuck" on talking about a specific desire. Set parameters on the amount of time this is discussed by using tokens (such as poker chips or pennies). Give your child five tokens in the morning (or divide the tokens—2 in the morning and another 3 in the afternoon) and allow them to



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.

Focus on executive function skills. Planning, memory, organization and flexible thinking are high-level skills that elude many students. Family game nights or “White Elephant” gift exchanges provide an opportunity to practice these skills. Or, for a child that struggles with competition, try crafts. Cookie baking and traditional family recipes require lots of planning and organization with the added bonuses of bonding and delicious results.

Promote friendships. Customs of exchanging gifts or small tokens during the holidays is a prime occasion for perspective-taking. Guide young ones in understanding that their desire for everything superhero isn’t shared by a sports enthusiast friend or a princess-crazed younger sister. A simple card craft, in which the child cuts pictures from a catalog, can be a heartfelt gift for a teacher, friend, or family member.

Develop empathy. The awareness that everyone requires help from time to time is part of our humanity and the holidays abound with chances to pitch in for someone in need. This may include shopping for or passing on lightly worn gifts for a toy drive or packing canned goods for a food drive. Other ideas might be delivering meals to those in need, reading to younger children, or stuffing/stamping envelopes for a non-profit. Some fundraising opportunities, like operating the Salvation Army red kettle with supervision, might also be possibilities. Be sure to research and discuss how each contribution makes an impact and provide verbal rather than tangible rewards for a job well done.

When you’re in the midst of day to day work, it’s easy to miss the progress of the big picture. Take a moment to journal or simply write a short description of how a holiday event went on your calendar. The following year you’ll not only have a better idea of which traditions work and which are better skipped, but you’ll also have a record of how far you’ve come.

Wishing you the happiest of holiday seasons!



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