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Navigating the Holiday Season with Children

by Summer Stanley



The lights, music, parades, and parties of the holiday season make it the most festive time of the year for many people; but for some children, it can be overwhelmingly chaotic.

Parents often feel obligated to attend every family function, every community party, and every school event during the holiday season—they fear letting down their children or their families by missing any of the festivities. However, what's right for one family may not be right for yours, and that's okay!

You know better than anyone what your child can and cannot handle. For example, if loud noises or music trigger your child's anxiety, he or she might enjoy a quiet car ride through merrily lit neighborhoods. If crowds are an issue, make your own holiday fun at home by baking cookies, cutting paper snowflakes, or making a popcorn garland for your Christmas tree.

Instead of jumping into the merriment with both feet, take holiday events in small bites. Take your child to a small, local holiday show rather than a huge, professional production. Let your family know that you may have to leave dinner early.

Take short trips to buy just one or two gifts at a time instead of going on big, all-day shopping sprees.

Search for sensory-friendly holiday events in your area. More and more communities are offering experiences that let children enjoy traditional holiday fun without the sensory overload.

Here are a few more tips for making this holiday season less stressful:



- Prepare your child for changes that may happen at school during the holidays, such as schedule changes and assemblies.



- Ask your child's therapist to do more role-playing, scripting, or social stories related to the holidays.



- Consider sending holiday cards to family and friends you may see this season and telling them what behavior they might expect from your child at gatherings. For example, if your child dislikes being hugged, you could mention that in your cards.



- If staying away from home overnight, take your child's favorite blanket or pillow to help him or her feel more comfortable.



- Have an agreed-upon escape signal or word in case your child starts to feel overwhelmed.



- Choose gifts and experiences that are appropriate to who your child is, not his or her "age expectation."

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- Remember that you're under no obligation to stay in unpleasant situations. If your child has a meltdown at a family gathering, it's okay to simply pack up and go home if that's what is best for your child and yourself.



- Take care of yourself too! If you are overwhelmed with holiday preparations, take a break and ask for respite care from family or friends so you can recharge.

With preparation and flexibility, you and your child can have a great holiday season!



Resources:

"Holidays with Special Needs Children," accessed Nov. 1, 2018, from <https://stressfreekids.com/10026/holidays-with-special-needs-children/>

"How to Conquer Holiday Stress in the Special Needs Household," accessed Nov. 1, 2018, from <https://adayinourshoes.com/holiday-stress-special-needs-household/>

"17 Ways to Enjoy the Holidays with Your Special Needs Child," accessed Nov. 1, 2018, from <https://www.verywellfamily.com/holidays-with-special-needs-child-4156526>

"Keep the Holidays Manageable for Your Special Needs Child," accessed Nov. 2, 2018, from <http://cincinnatifamilymagazine.com/special-needs/keep-holidays-managable-special-needs-child>

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