

How to cope with Christmas



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As most parents know any change in your child's routine can be disruptive and anxiety provoking. A few things to remember that might help you and your child cope with Christmas are:

Decorations: When you decorate your house for Christmas for many children with ASD it becomes a different house. Try to keep decorations in one room only, so your child can still feel familiar in the rest of the house. Put decorations up gradually whilst your child is around, if possible. If they go to school and come back to a decorated house this may unsettle them.

Advent Calenders: Try to set a clear calendar for the month of December that clearly outlines when school finishes, when visitors will arrive, when Christmas Day is and what will happen on each day. Also extend your calendar to when school starts back and let your child mark off each day as it happens. This gives a sense of control and a clear idea of what to expect with changing routines and events. If possible, try to blend in some days with activities your child really enjoys, so they can look forward to those days and count down to them.

Christmas Dinner: If your child has strong likes and dislikes don't stress about them sitting down to the same Christmas Dinner as everyone else. Keep to what they are used to and don't try to get them to eat what they wouldn't tolerate during the year. It's only another meal. And it doesn't have to be perfect. Use familiar cutlery, dishes and cups for your child. If you dress your table for Christmas dinner and your child is likely to react strongly, clear a space to have the familiar table for them to sit down to.

Family Visits: If you are visiting family and friends or they are visiting you, try to be definite about times of arrival and departure and schedule this for your child. Have a dedicated room or space where your child can retreat to when things get too much. Have favourite games or toys available in this space and make sure other children or adults do not intrude. Put a sign on the door to highlight it's your child's chill out space.

Christmas Presents: When Christmas presents are exchanged we all expect our children to be polite and show appreciation. If your child is likely to say 'I don't like that, take it back' or throw it down, or lash out when someone tries to hug them etc, warn family and friends not to expect too much, how to respond and not to take it personal. Try to prepare your child for these times with a social story or comic strip conversation, build it into their schedule, but be flexible. Your child may not be able to be in the same room as visitors. Work out an explanation in advance, rather than trying to explain or excuse when that embarrassing moment occurs!

It may be difficult for family and friends to pick a Christmas present that your child will like, is suitable, or that they will get something from. Draw up a list of possible presents that family and friends can pick from that relate to your child's special interest. If a present is clothing some children can't cope with new clothes. Ask the present giver to let you have it in advance so that you can wash it several times and/or pick an item

of clothing that has a picture of their special interest on it. Wrap the Christmas present in paper that has images of their special interest. It doesn't have to be Christmas paper, it could have trains on it or pictures of Doctor Who. Images of special interests can be photocopied onto ordinary paper. All these may help the child accept their present.

Some children cannot cope with unexpected surprises and a present wrapped up is one. Using a digital camera to take photos of the gift before it is wrapped and using the photo as a gift tag, so your child knows what to expect can help. Don't be surprised if your child only focuses on the one toy that is their special interest. Plan to reintroduce their other toys later in the day or on Boxing Day. If necessary, schedule time to play with their special interest toy and then their other toys. Remember if you are stressed about Christmas, chances are your child is too. If they need to immerse themselves in their special interest to cope, let them.

Santa: Children with ASD will find it hard to put things in perspective, see the bigger picture, rationalise what is happening and cope with new people or things. We expect a lot from any child to be glad to see a stranger in a red suit, sit on his knee to get their photo taken or know that he will be creeping down the chimney when everyone's asleep. Any other time of the year if a strange person broke into your house in that way you'd be calling the police!

Children with ASD may worry about this happening. Using visuals, social stories etc. to explain what Santa does and what the reward is might help. Be realistic, don't say Santa comes down the chimney if you don't need to. It could be Thomas the Tank Engine helping Santa, if that's what your child likes. Although they may not go to bed if they think they'll miss Thomas. What is important, is that you don't expect your child to make sense of Christmas by themselves. They will need help to remain feeling safe and secure with all the changes that Christmas brings.

Coping with the pressure of Christmas: Be realistic. Preparing for and celebrating Christmas is stressful for everyone. Try to find some time for yourself. Even if it is for a long soak in the bath, or a trip to the hairdressers or watching a DVD. Ask family or friends to help out and give you a break.

If you are cooking Christmas dinner and are panicking about how you will manage if your child is not coping, cook the turkey and ham on Christmas Eve and carve it. Pack it in foil with a bit of juice and re-heat thoroughly on the day itself. Prep your vegetables on Christmas Eve. Do anything you can to cut down on the workload. Buy ready prepped vegetables. It's only one day out of the year and the extra expense is worth it if it helps you feel less stressed.

Don't be afraid to talk to your GP if you find things are getting too much. Talk to other parents about how they manage Christmas. Thinking about and planning for it in advance, will reduce the stress of your child's meltdown that has caught you unawares. And remember, keep your sense of humour in close proximity throughout Christmas, it is a time of celebration.

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