

Information Sheet

Celebration Time Survival Guide

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Whatever your religion, the major festivals, Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Yom Kippur, Diwali etc, can be a joyous and exciting time – but they are also busy and stressful for everyone – you are not alone.

Changes in routine, unfamiliar objects appearing everywhere and potential sensory overload from all the new sights, sounds and smells, often make it a very difficult time for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families. Here are some tips that might help.

General Preparation

The best way to reduce celebration-related stress is to prepare children with Autism Spectrum Disorder as much as possible for what will be happening.

- Start talking to your child about the festival and what this means in your family before preparations start. For traditional Australian celebrations, when decorations first start appearing in the shops or when the school starts activities are good times.
- Make a visual calendar/timetable. On this, mark dates of any important events such as buying decorations or decorating your home, making food and visitors coming to stay. Also mark when school holidays and any other changes to normal activities eg after school activities finish, school concerts.
- Build into the calendar details of the return to normal, eg removal of decorations, visitors leaving, return to school etc.

- Mark off events on the calendar as they happen. Some children might prefer a “washing line” approach where events are pegged on and taken off at completion.
- For some children, seeing photos or pictures of what things look like during the festival can help, such as from catalogues or magazines. Include pictures of what food might be eaten. These pictures could be attached to the calendar or kept in a separate photo album or scrapbook. Be careful if your child is very literal as they might expect your festival to look exactly like the pictures!
- Before and after photos of your celebrations from previous years may help children know what to expect.
- It is important to continue with at least some aspects of the child’s normal routine, such as usual wake up and bedtime routines etc.
- Social Stories are a great strategy for teaching children what is expected of them during celebrations. For example, “What happens on ‘Festival’ Day” or “What to do when someone gives you a present.”



Sensory Issues

For some children, the sensory overload at festival times can be very difficult. There are extra noises, sights and smells. If this is too much for your child, try to avoid taking them to places like shopping centres around Christmas time and allow them some extra “chill out” time to wind down each day. If your child is sensitive to smells, you might have to avoid getting decorations with strong smells.

Decorations

If your child does not cope well with changes to the home environment, take decorating slowly.

- Show your child where the decorations are kept so they become familiar with these items before they are brought out.
- Involve your child in decorating, even if they are just in the room while it is being done.
- If your child does not like change, keep their room a decoration-free-zone where they can escape from all the activity.
- A Christmas tree is a particularly big decoration: you may need to introduce it in stages: first put it up, wait a few days, add some decorations etc. Your child may like to choose a decoration.

Prior Practice

Practice the things your child might find difficult at various events, eg sitting at the table.

- Practice waiting. This is often the hardest thing for all children at Christmas!
- Practice eating the food that might be served on Christmas day in advance or if this will be too hard, take some food your child likes.

On the Special Day(s)

If you think your child will struggle with a long day, arrive late and/or leave early. It is better to spend a short, happy time celebrating than ending the day with tantrums and tears.

- Advise friends and relatives about your child's preferences regarding hugging and kissing. Is it best avoided? Should it be done on your child's terms? Do they like cuddles?
- If you are going out for the day, discuss with your hosts having access to a quiet area where your child can “chill out” if it gets too much.
- Think about how you will react if any critical remarks are made about your child's behaviour at an event. You might want to smile and let it pass, or you might like to discuss Autism Spectrum Disorder with the person. Getting angry will spoil your day. It is important that you take some time to enjoy yourself too.

Presents

Teach children a simple, appropriate way to respond when receiving presents, eg Say ‘thank-you’.

- Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders do not like surprises, so it might be best to tell the child what their presents will be, where they will be and how they will be wrapped. Alternatively, you could put a photo or catalogue picture of the present on the gift tag, or you could wrap the present in cellophane.
- Large numbers of presents can be overwhelming for those with an ASD. If you think this will be the case, set a limit on presents, eg one from each person, or suggest that people group together to buy a few more expensive presents.

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