

The Toby Henderson Trust

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CHRISTMAS AUTISM FRIENDLY

The Specialist Family Support Team at The Toby Henderson Trust have put together a guide full of advice and tips on how you can create an autism-friendly Christmas.

Most of us welcome the change to our daily routine that Christmas brings. We enjoy seasonal foods and drinks. Seeing friends and family. Giving and receiving presents. Seeing lights twinkle, hearing carols sung, and even joining the throngs of shoppers in town.

However, all of those things above can cause sensory overload for autistic children, young people and adults, leading to discomfort or even distress. If you want to make December autism-friendly, you may have to shelve the idea of a traditional, Instagram-ready Christmas. But with some planning and flexibility, you can make it a happy holiday. Here's how.



PLANNING AHEAD

- Give your child a visual aid to help them count down to the big day. Autistic children crave predictability. They also sometimes have trouble with the concept of time. A minute might seem like an hour, and a week is hard to imagine. Advent calendars are perfect for this!
- Make a calendar for the season, showing all the changes they can expect. December usually brings changes to your normal weekly and daily routines. Your calendar could include things like when the decorations begin to go up, when the tree is taken down, when school starts again. We have included a calendar below which is available to download on our website: www.ttht.co.uk.
- Talk about Christmas. Discuss all the things that make it different and special. Read books about Christmas and look at photos of your children taken at past Christmases.
- Make a social story. These are short, descriptions of a situation, event or activity. They're usually illustrated and include specific information about what to expect in that situation and why. For advice on how to make them, see the [NAS website](http://www.nas.org.uk). A social story about Christmas Day could include a schedule of what will happen that day, opening presents and foods they will eat.
- Get them involved. Somehow new things are less intimidating when you've helped plan and prepare them. What would your child enjoy helping with? Writing cards? Decorating the tree? Making food? Wrapping gifts? Thinking up a menu?



ROUTINES AND SCHEDULES

- Keep to your usual daily routines as much as you can to maintain predictability. It's important that autistic individuals know what to expect.
- Make schedules for non-routine days in whatever format works best for your child. Remember that you'll have to stick to it though if you want to avoid distress and meltdown, so make it achievable.
- Remind your child what's coming up at regular intervals if they benefit from regular prompts and reminders. First, we'll do this, then we'll do that. Tell them how long it will take.
- Use a timer or clock so your child knows how long each activity will last. Don't extend the timer after you've set it. Not even secretly. They need to be able to trust it.
- Make sure your child knows about changes to the routine well in advance if this would help them.
- When you have a routine that works, stick with it! Finding a Christmas routine for your family might take a trial and error over a few years. And yours might end up looking different to others but that's ok! For example, you might spread out opening presents over a few days. Or you might only have your tree up for one day. But if it works, that's great and you know you can do it again. We always say "you do you".
- Don't overschedule your child. While it's tempting to pack as much fun into your time off as you can, it can all be too much for an autistic individual. Make sure they have plenty of space between activities. And provide lots of transition time and down time. It might be worth looking up the Spoon Theory or Energy Accountancy which are visual toolkits for energy rationing. For more information about Spoon Theory visit: <http://reachoutasc.com/spoon-theory-and-autism/> and Energy Accountancy visit: <https://www.barrierstoeducation.co.uk/energy-accounting>.

VISITORS AND VISITING

- Talk to friends and family before visits. Tell them what your plan for the day is.
- Ask people to phone ahead before visiting so your child knows what to expect and who will be coming to their home.
- Show your child photos of the people they will be seeing beforehand but also the environment they will be visiting.
- Give your child plenty of notice of transitions to new activities. For example, give a ten-minute warning before dinner.
- Have a quiet space in your house that your child can retreat to when it all gets too much. This gives your child the opportunity to escape when they need to. If you're visiting anywhere else you could ask if there will be any quieter spaces that they can access or if family or friends could make a quiet space in their home. It's important to not make any fuss when an autistic person needs some time away, we like to view this as a positive that they feel comfortable to remove themselves from a situation to help with their own regulation, especially when they're overwhelmed.
- Give your child a job to do if they need to be kept occupied. Having something else to focus on can distract them from the stress that the festive season may bring. You could also involve them in any decisions to help them feel in control and involved in any process.



FOOD AND SENSORY ISSUES

- Try holiday foods in advance. That way you can see what your child likes and doesn't like. It can also give you a chance to discover any cooking smells that may be too overpowering for your child. If they struggle with smells, you could use a piece of material and spray some preferred scents such as perfume or essential oils to help manage this.
- Take your child's favourite/safe foods with you. Sometimes crunchy foods are helpful for regulation such as raw carrot, pretzels and ice cubes/lollies.
- Let your child eat what they usually eat on Christmas Day! If they are used to a sandwich and fruit for lunch, or the 25th falls on 'chicken nuggets night' then just go with that.
- Maybe have a buffet instead of a traditional Christmas Dinner. That way everyone gets to eat the food they like, at their own pace. You could show them photos beforehand of what will be available on the day.
- Practice wearing 'special clothes' beforehand. A new outfit for Christmas day might feel all different and just not right. 'Party' clothes aren't often very comfortable and autistic individuals can be particularly sensitive to things like seams and scratchy fabrics. You might have a few dress rehearsals before the day. You could also wear clothes that they feel comfortable in underneath any costumes or party outfits.
- Let your child wear their everyday clothes. Those old jogging bottoms and a favourite T-shirt are perfect Christmas outfits if they make your child feel more comfortable.
- If you visit another family home or if you're out in the community, you could take something to help deal with the noise. This could be ear defenders, ear buds, noise cancelling headphones or a device with music on.
- Be aware of things that make loud noises, like Christmas crackers and party poppers. Consider not using them at all when your child is nearby or maybe give your child a warning before you use them.



DECORATIONS

- Consider not putting up all the decorations while your child is not at home. Coming home to find the house looking completely different could be very upsetting.
- Decorate gradually. For example, put the tree up one day, and decorate it over a couple of days. You might want to add other things a bit at a time.
- You might like to take a photo of what your house normally looks like and set a defined date of when the festive period will end.
- Get your child to choose decorations and help you to put them up. They might find it easier to cope with their surroundings looking different if they made some of the changes themselves.
- Avoid decorations that may be too stimulating or distracting. Flashing lights or having lots of things hanging from the walls or ceiling might just be too much for some. Although it might not feel as Christmassy to you, keeping it minimal just might help your child stay calm.
- Consider decorating just one room in the house. Or keeping the twinkliest and noisiest things away from the areas your child uses every day.



GIFTS

- Your child might want to unwrap gifts gradually and this is ok. Opening lots of presents all at once on Christmas morning can be overwhelming. You could unwrap gifts in a timeframe that your child is comfortable with. That could be one or two presents at a time throughout Christmas day, or over a week or two. Remember you know them best!
- Remember that some autistic individuals don't like surprises. Although it may seem strange to you, you could let them know what's in the gift before they unwrap it. You could wrap their gifts together with them, even leave them unwrapped or put them in a gift bag without any wrapping paper on. It could be that you wrap in cellophane or plain paper and put a photo of the item outside on the paper or on a label. Another idea could be putting presents in a pillow case too. In that way if your child enjoys the act of unwrapping, they still get this without the added stress of the surprise or it could be that they're sensitive to the noise or sensation.
- Others might be wondering what to gift your child. We love the idea of creating a wish list which you could create with your child which could be shared with relatives.
- Make gifts ready to play with before you wrap them. Lots of autistic children find it difficult to wait.
- You could hide presents somewhere else until the big day. Seeing presents under the tree for days or even weeks before the 25th might be just too much for children with a poor concept of time.
- You could be open and honest with family members about how your child copes with opening gifts and that they might find it difficult to communicate during this time so not to expect a "thank you". Your child might prefer to open their present on their own at a later time.



AND FINALLY...

- Remember to look after YOU! If you can try, take some time to relax (even just 10 minutes) and do something for yourself. This is especially important as Christmas can be a busy and stressful time of year.
- If things go wrong, be okay with that being okay. Your child might get upset, upset others or refuse to take part and this is ok. If you know what went wrong and it's fixable, then you can try to fix it next year. And if it isn't, just let it go. There is no law that says you should do Christmas a certain way.
- Celebrate the season your way. The holiday season is meant to be a time for fun and relaxation. If the things you have to do to make it fun and relaxing seem odd to other people, don't mind them. There's no official Christmas rule book.
- Remember this is not a to-do list. Or a list of do's and don'ts. These are simply suggestions – made by us. There's more than one way to live a family life and equally more than one way to enjoy an Autism friendly Christmas.

We hope this guide helps you and your family in the run up to Christmas.

Merry Christmas

love

Team Toby