

A guide to the festive season

for parents and carers of children with autism



For most people, Christmas is a fun and exciting time. But for children with autism and their families, it can be very stressful. Children with autism often become confused or distressed by the change in routine or the increased social activity, and this can be upsetting for the rest of the family.

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways you can reduce the impact of Christmas on your child and your family without cancelling it altogether. Remember that every family and every child is different, so please adapt and implement these tips in the way best suited to your child.



1 Make a schedule

As Christmas approaches, highlight the holiday period on a calendar or timetable. This will help your child to prepare for the time spent away from school and the change in routine. Mark up the days when you will buy and put up your Christmas tree and decorations, and any other changes. Then, tick off each event as it happens so your child can follow their progress. If you use visual timetables with your child continue to use them to show what they will be doing during this period. Keeping a schedule can also help reassure those children who become obsessive about Christmas.



2 Tie in with the school's activities

It may help reduce your child's anxiety if you introduce the idea of Christmas at home at the same time as it is introduced at school. Contact the school to find out, and try to incorporate the same strategies and symbols at home that your child is experiencing in lessons.



3 Adapt the Christmas routine

Your child may not see Christmas in the way that other children do, and the things that some children find exciting may be unnerving or simply uninteresting to them. Adapt your Christmas routine to take account of this and don't place pressure on your child or yourself. Let your child feel involved and find a way to incorporate an activity they enjoy into their routine over the festive period.



4 Which aspects can be avoided?

Think about which aspects of Christmas might overload your child and which could be avoided? If your other children have separate bedrooms, you could perhaps make them the Christmas zones in your house, rather than communal areas. This will reduce sensory overload and anxiety. Watch out for sensory overload through items such as candles, lights, food and Christmas crackers.



5 Involve your child in Christmas activities

Involve your child in activities like putting up the decorations, even if this means them simply being in the room when it happens. If your child wants to take a more active role, give them a particular job to do. This will help them to feel included and less anxious about the changes happening around them. Spread the decorating process over a few days to give your child more time to adjust. For example, you could place the tree in position then wait for a few days before you start to decorate it.



6 Create a Christmas-free zone

Establish a Christmas-free zone somewhere in your house, so that your child can spend some time there when needed. This will also allow you to keep tabs on their anxiety level and make any adaptations you need to prepare for the rest of the day.



Remember the needs of siblings

Set aside one-to-one time with your other children so that everyone gets enough attention, and incorporate this into the schedule. Your child with autism could occupy themselves with a favourite activity in the Christmas-free zone during these times, or spend time with other family members. This time could also be used to explain autism to siblings or other young relatives. Useful information for siblings of children with autism can be found on the NAS website.



Book Father Christmas in advance

If you and your child are visiting Father Christmas' grotto, you may be able to jump the queue if you explain your child's condition. Remember, a child with autism may not react as positively to meeting Father Christmas as other children, especially if they are unprepared. Ring ahead, get there early, and prepare your child by explaining who Father Christmas is using pictures and Social Stories.



Manage and prepare visitors

Include the days when family and friends are visiting on your child's calendar, along with photos of each visitor. Ask family and friends to stagger their visiting times and support you in caring for the children over the festive period. If your visitors don't know much about autism, explain it to them beforehand. You'll find information about autism on the NAS website.



Set Christmas shopping rules

Set up a Christmas shopping schedule to prepare your child for the shops you'll be visiting. Avoid last minute changes if possible, but if not, adapt the schedule to explain these. Set shopping rules and coping strategies beforehand and give your child a task to carry out, such as ticking off items from the shopping list. If they struggle with sensory overload in shops, a personal stereo, earplugs or dark glasses may help.



Plan and prepare for presents

Presents can be overwhelming and confusing for children with autism. Set specific times for receiving presents or allow your child to open them when they feel ready, or without an audience. Many children with autism don't like surprises, so it might be best to tell your child what their gifts are going to be, or leave them unwrapped. You could use clear wrapping paper to make them feel included, while removing the element of surprise. Give your child some stock replies to use, such as "thank you", and make sure that toys come ready to use – load batteries, remove tags, and pre-install computer games.



Plan the return to normal routine

Returning to a normal routine can be harder for some children with autism than Christmas itself. Include the removal of Christmas decorations and the return to school on your child's calendar and use photos to remind your child what the house usually looks like. Avoid Christmas obsessions by setting a clear end to the holiday period, but explain that Christmas will happen again next year. Remember to prepare them for the return to the normal school routine by including the dates in their schedule, and discussing the activities that this will involve. You could consider using a rewards system until your child settles back into the normal routine.

Further information and support

The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism. We provide a wide range of advice, information, support and specialist services to 100,000 people each year and campaign and lobby for lasting, positive change for the half a million people affected by autism in the UK.

- > Visit our website at www.autism.org.uk

Join our Facebook group!

Join our Facebook group to discuss Christmas tips with other parents and carers.

- > Go to www.facebook.com/NationalAutisticSociety

Autism Helpline

Our Autism Helpline provides impartial, confidential information, advice and support for people with autism spectrum disorders, their families, professionals, researchers and students.

- > **0845 070 4004**
Open 10am-4pm, Monday-Friday
Please note that the Christmas opening hours will vary:
Christmas Eve: 10am-12pm
Christmas Day: Closed
Mon 28 Dec: Closed
New Years Eve: 10am-12pm
New Years Day: Closed

Parent to Parent Line

Our free, confidential telephone support service puts parents of adults or children with autism in touch with volunteer parents who understand their experiences. Availability over the Christmas period may vary.

- > **0800 952 0520**



Throw a FestiviTea party!

Celebrate the festive season by holding your own FestiviTea Party in aid of The National Autistic Society.

- > Visit www.autism.org.uk/festivitea before 18 December to find out more.

Christmas cards

Why not order your NAS Christmas cards now?

- > Visit www.autism.org.uk/christmascards

Design a NAS Christmas card for 2010!

The National Autistic Society are running a Christmas card design competition for children and adults on the autism spectrum.

- > Further details and competition guidelines are on our website.
- > You can also contact: publications@nas.org.uk