

We wish you an autism friendly Christmas



By Dr Helen Hughes - Consultant Clinical Psychologist and the Clinical Team at Options Malvern View



Image: created by one of the young people we support

Introduction

Bright twinkling lights, carols, meeting new people, eating different foods...sound like a perfect Christmas? For people on the autistic spectrum Christmas can be a stressful time and not the welcome break that most people enjoy.

For most people these are things that make Christmas so special, however for an individual with autism these are the very factors that make Christmas so difficult and a time to get through as quickly as possible.

In this issue we offer advice and guidance for parents and carers who look after children, young people and adults with autism, so that Christmas can be a more enjoyable and less stressful time for all involved.

1. How to handle change

Some people with autism find change difficult. Changes to routines, environment and social expectations can mean that Christmas can be a confusing and challenging time. For those who value predictability surprise guests can be overwhelming.

The abstract nature of the festive season can also heighten people's anxiety. Overall these changes can result in an unpleasant experience, so what can we do to help people enjoy the festivities and reduce distress? Introduce the decorations slowly so the changes to the environment are not sudden. Alternatively, just have the decorations up from Christmas Eve to Boxing Day in order to reduce the length of the time of the change.

Involve everyone in planning the changes; for example shopping for decorations, deciding where to put them, deciding on the number of decorations.

Create a schedule for Christmas day including all activities such as opening presents, eating lunch, and family visits. A schedule will create structure and reduce the unpredictability of Christmas day.

Create a safe Christmas free zone. If Christmas becomes overwhelming this can be used as a retreat.

Some of the people we support shared their thoughts about Christmas...

"I don't like crowds at Christmas"

"Carols are a bit loud"

"I get excited about Christmas but sometimes I feel a bit anxious"

"I don't like singing with lots of people"

"I prefer Christmas to be short"

2. Sensory Overload

Christmas can be an overstimulating time of year for someone on the autistic spectrum. Some will appreciate the new high impact sensory stimulation, for others this can be a struggle.

The types of extra sensory stimulation that we tend to associate with Christmas include:



Vision—Extra visual stimulation to process such as lights and decorations.



Smell—Different and often more intense smells such as incense, perfumes, cooking, rich food to smell and taste.



Touch can be affected by new clothes, adornments, decorations and crowds.



Sound—New and multiple layered sounds to process such as crowds, background music, excited children, carol singers and brass bands.

With heightened sensory stimulation someone with autism can find these sensory stimulations overwhelming and not at all pleasurable. Here are some tips to reduce sensory overload and to manage difficult situations.

- Steer clear of crowds if you know this is a difficult situation.
- Keep decorations to a minimum.
- Avoid Christmas crackers.
- Offer structure to present opening e.g. take turns opening gifts, restrict the number of gifts from each person.
- Use preferred therapeutic tools to reduce sensory overload e.g. ear defenders, fiddles, weighted therapy.

3. Communication aids

Communication aids have been shown to reduce anxiety for people on the autistic spectrum. Big changes in routines such as going to events, parties and meeting new people can not only make the world appear chaotic and unpredictable, but also places new social demands on the person which can lead to heightened levels of arousal and distress.

Good communication is vital in preparing people for change; without the appropriate communication strategies those with autism can feel excluded and find the festive period stressful.

So what strategies can we use?

- Countdown calendars to visually communicate Christmas day and the events leading up to it.
- Story boards to communicate changes in routines.
- Visual schedules to communicate daily routines and reduce the level of disruption.
- Christmas Makaton signs to enable the person with autism to feel included.

Spread the word...

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our in-house clinical team. If you found this information useful please feel free to distribute this help sheet to your own contacts parents, carers, social workers, or anyone who you feel may benefit from them.

If you would like any further information please contact us:
01789 767800 | info@optionsgroup.co.uk

For more information on our services or to receive future autism e-bulletins
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