Planning for an autism friendly Christmas or Festival celebration

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This is an adapted post- covid version of an article from two years ago. All links are updated.

For those of us who have children on the autism spectrum, planning and preparing means that everyone, including ourselves, will have a better holiday period.

The tips below are mostly from other parents/carers of what works in their family.

**Tip one: Think how the holidays look to your child**

This one is a big one for parents, carers and extended families! We all have memories and expectations of festivities for ourselves- but our children may not experience or enjoy the same things that we did. Spending some time thinking about what will be best for our children really helps. Sometimes that hardest thing to change can be our own expectation as parents of what the Christmas holiday period should look like.

Have your festivities the way you think works for your family and not the way others tell you they should be, and everyone has a better time.

**Tip two: Let your child know what is happening over the whole holiday period, with some visual support.**

This one has always been really important in my family- and luckily there are now some free handouts that you can download to make a calendar for the whole period. Uncertainty and changes in routine, as we all know, can make for stressed and unhappy children and young people! And stressed children mean stressed parents/carers.

Possible templates for Calendars include:

[Free Editable Christmas Activity Calendar - PK1Kids](https://pk1kids.com/christmas-activity-calendar/)

[T-S-2916-Christmas-Activities-for-School-Visual-Timetable.pdf (twinkl.co.uk)](https://content.twinkl.co.uk/resource/90/58/T-S-2916-Christmas-Activities-for-School-Visual-Timetable.pdf?__token__=exp=1670947643~acl=%2Fresource%2F90%2F58%2FT-S-2916-Christmas-Activities-for-School-Visual-Timetable.pdf%2A~hmac=f2fb78397087ba3c6824fd5ca491480a06f711eb729603a648ee55fb9c42d5fd)

[Visual Timetable for the Christmas Period (teacher made) (twinkl.co.uk)](https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resource/visual-timetable-for-the-christmas-period-t-par-1665568444)

**Tip three: Where possible, keep your routine as similar as possible**

I think all of us understand how important this one can be: one parent advises getting back to normal as soon as possible after Christmas.

Other families say that keeping the routine nearly the same even on Christmas day can really help. Certainly, having a visual timetable of the day itself will almost certainly help.

[Visual Timetable for Christmas Day (teacher made) - Twinkl](https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resource/visual-timetable-for-christmas-day-t-par-1665130051)

**Tip four: Explain about visitors**

Many parents suggest having pictures of the visitors and talking about who they are- as well as having their arrival (and departure!) on your holiday calendar.

In addition, it can be useful to have a space your child can escape to when visitors are around. As one parent says, “If we have visitors at home we have a quiet area/sensory retreat where our child can go to avoid the constant chatter. I am going to give them a visual prompt to use this weekend so we can practice this.”

Letting visitors know how important this is for your child is also really important. Again quoting a parent, “It’s our house, so it’s our rules!”

**Tip Five: be aware of sensory issues.**

For children with sensory issues, the holiday period must be a nightmare, with everything looking, smelling, sounding and feeling different. Home can often be a refuge from sensory over-stimulation, but that is not the case at this time of year and there is often no escape except in the child’s room.

One parent says: “We have pared down the decorations at home – a small tree, a few lights and cards.” Some parents also advise putting decorations up- and taking them down- slowly, to reduce the changes experienced.

Food is such a huge part of Christmas and other festivals- many families say that they adapt Christmas dinner so there is something that their child will like ensuring their senses are not too overloaded with the demand of eating unfamiliar food.

Here are some possible festive sensory activities from ‘The Chaos and the Clutter’.

[Christmas sensory Activities](https://www.thechaosandtheclutter.com/archives/christmas-sensory-activities)

And here are some Christmas themed breathing exercises

[t-p-1667216373-christmas-breathing-techniques-for-children-written-by-a-yoga-teacher\_ver\_1.pdf (twinkl.co.uk)](https://content.twinkl.co.uk/resource/c1/28/t-p-1667216373-christmas-breathing-techniques-for-children-written-by-a-yoga-teacher_ver_1.pdf?__token__=exp=1670947733~acl=%2Fresource%2Fc1%2F28%2Ft-p-1667216373-christmas-breathing-techniques-for-children-written-by-a-yoga-teacher_ver_1.pdf%2A~hmac=ad802d9981457cfa79b6da18efbc0e436c98cf93a45a8bcb4192b8ec0e793b5a)

**Tip six: Find a ritual for opening presents that works for your family**

Again, advice from another parent: “Gift opening is very relaxed and we don’t overdo the presents.”

I know that some children are really bothered by parcels because of the uncertainty of what is inside and the difficulty of unwrapping. Some families have creative solutions for this such as telling the child what it is as they open it, or even letting the child wrap the present up with them! Parents and carers are the ones that know their own children best, but it’s always worth having a think about this, and talking through the ritual you decide on with all the family so that no-one is disappointed or overwhelmed.

**Tip seven: Try to be as relaxed as possible and enjoy yourself!**

I know that is almost impossible as a parent/carer, but as parents and carers, I think we all know things go better if we can get somewhere near that magical state!

Hope that you have a relaxed and stress free holiday.

Wishing you an autism friendly Christmas and New Year 2023

**Other Useful Links**

Relaxed events- some before Christmas, some after

[Relaxed (Autism Friendly)/ Roald Dahl’s Matilda The Musical - HOME (homemcr.org)](https://homemcr.org/film/relaxed-autism-friendly-roald-dahls-matilda-the-musical/)

[National Autism Friendly Cinema Screenings | Dimensions (dimensions-uk.org)](https://dimensions-uk.org/get-involved/campaigns/autism-friendly-cinema-screenings/)

[Autism-Friendly Early Opening (manchester.ac.uk)](https://events.manchester.ac.uk/event/event:hzx-kyk66cup-r7det2/autismfriendly-early-opening)

[Festive Sing-along Relaxed Performance (manchester.ac.uk)](https://events.manchester.ac.uk/event/event:x5u-l7rrdorz-hfif89/festive-singalong-relaxed-performance)

[Open Doors autism friendly workshop (manchesterartgallery.org)](https://manchesterartgallery.org/event/open-doors-17-december/)

[Autism-Friendly-Guide.pdf (nationalfootballmuseum.com)](https://www.nationalfootballmuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Autism-Friendly-Guide.pdf)

Autism Friendly Christmas Tips

[Tips (autism.org.uk)](https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/leisure/christmas/tips)

[Preparing for Christmas: autism resources](https://autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/professional-practice/christmas-resources)

[Autism and Christmas » NeuroClastic](https://neuroclastic.com/autism-and-christmas/)

[‘How to’… have an autism-friendly Christmas – Autism Together](https://www.autismtogether.co.uk/autism-friendly-christmas/)