

# 13 Holiday Survival Tips For Your Child With Special Needs

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While most children live for the holiday season, it can be an extremely stressful time of year for children with autism and other forms of learning disability. The disruption to their routine, unfamiliar sights and smells, the house full of noise and people – it can all prove too much. Holidays are all about the family, but it can be hard keeping everyone happy.



The following tips for surviving the holiday season have been contributed to [Scope](#) by parents of children and adults with special needs. The general consensus seems to be to plan ahead. Whether that's creating a visual story for your child, preparing them what to expect, or giving relatives a heads-up in advance about your child's particular needs – preparation is key.

## 1. Reduce The Stress

Try to find ways to reduce the stress – both on your child and you. Schedule in quiet times and create chill-out zones in your home. Remember, your child will pick up on your stress levels, so try not to over-stretch yourself.

## 2. Ask For Help

Friends and family may not know how they can help unless you tell them. Give them a list of things they can do to support you – from looking after your child while you spend quality time with your other children – to pouring you a glass of champagne!

## 3. Wrap Up Familiar Toys

If your child is not keen on opening presents because they're new and unfamiliar, try wrapping up some favorite toys. Sometimes unwrapping something familiar is very reassuring.

## 4. Give Your Child A Job And A Schedule

I always give my children, who have ASD, 'jobs' to do at family gatherings – take coats, offer nibbles round etc. Giving them something to do reduces their stress of having people in the house. I also give them an itinerary so they understand, for example, that people stand around and chat a lot, and that is part of the occasion.

## 5. Manage New Smells

Add cinnamon to your child's play-dough to gradually introduce new smells. One thing that people with autism complain about during the holidays is the many different perfume smells coming from visiting adults. Ask your family and friends to hold off on the perfume.

## 6. Work On Gift Giving

Help and encourage the person you are caring for to give gifts. This provides an excellent opportunity to work on social skills, like thinking of other people's needs and interests, and being kind and helpful. I support my daughter to make gifts for her family and friends. She also looks forward to giving out the presents as well.

## **7. Reserve Some Special Time For Your Child**

It's easy to get overloaded with festive preparations at this time of year, so plan daily activities to make some special time for your kids – ie. 5 to 10 mins of undivided attention. Let your child take the lead, tune into their world and see it through their eyes.

## **8. Create A Weekly Calendar**

Print off a week-to-view calendar page from your PC or the internet and add a picture of your planned activities during the holidays (divide into morning, lunch afternoon etc) and this will help put your child at ease about the week ahead.

## **9. Prepare Your Family**

Talk to family members ahead of time. Discuss your child's specific needs, and gently but firmly tell them what your plans are. Be sure to let them know that this will make the whole experience better for everyone. Ask for their support.

## **10. Prepare A Bag Of Activities**

When you are visiting friends or relatives, fill a backpack with things your child finds comforting or enjoys playing with – toy cars, a stuffed animal, a CD and CD player, or a few books. If your child gets over stimulated, find a quiet corner or a back room and pull out the backpack.

## **11. Prepare With Pictures**

Our daughter loves looking at pictures and we have found it a great way of explaining different events to her. We have a holiday season book we've made with pictures of her and the family doing things in the holidays. We've included pictures of her in the school play, relatives coming to visit, etc. It helps her not to get overwhelmed with what's going on.

## **12. Create an Alternative Experience**

I run a group for kids who have an autism spectrum disorder. Instead of having a party at this time of year, we arrange an experience for them. For them and us, as their parents, it's much more enjoyable as there is no pressure to conform to the demands that a social occasion puts on them.

## **13. Easy To Open Presents**

My son has trouble with fine motor skills so I 'doctor' his cards and presents to allow him to open them easily. Makes for a much happier time for all and gives him a sense of satisfaction that he can complete tasks.

