



15 Stress-Reducing Holiday Tips for Families with Special Needs

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Holiday time is a joyous time to spend with family, loved ones and friends. It is also a time to be thankful, give to others, exchange gifts, and wish for peace.

In terms of my own special family, I look forward to all of the wonderful things that come with the holiday season. Having said that, the holiday season can be a difficult time due to changes to any of the following:

- Routine
- School programs
- Vacation
- Travel
- Visiting family and friends
- Attending functions
- Excruciating amounts of down time
- Too much noise, and lastly;
- Too much food

I have developed some coping mechanisms that help my own family survive the holiday season as unscathed as possible. It also affords my special family the enjoyment of the holiday season much more.

Here are my tips:

1. Do Not Over-Schedule

It is tempting to make frequent visits, attend gatherings and get involved in many activities during holiday time. This can often be too much for your special family. I feel that it is better to have one successful experience rather than many stressful and difficult ones. If my son needs to be on his best behavior for an activity, I make sure he has plenty of non-stressful time before and after an event to just be himself.

2. Bring Your Own Food & Supplies to Gatherings

If your loved one is picky eater or on a special diet, or if there is a risk of tantrums, difficult behavior and stress over missing his/her favorite food, bring your own supply. Furthermore, if there are certain items that will help calm your child; such as iPads, books, stuffed animals or weighted vests, make certain you bring them to all gatherings.

3. Offer to Buy Gifts

My family and friends worry so much when it comes to buying gifts for my son with special needs. In order to alleviate this worry, I buy my son's gifts prior to any event, and my family members will then present the gift to him. This takes the stress off my family members and also ensures my son will not act out if he opens something he does not like or understand.

4. Try to Build in as Much Routine as Possible

Although it is hard, I try to build as much of a routine as possible over the holidays. I keep a consistent wake up and bed times over breaks and throughout the year. I try to keep similar limits that I set

during school. In our home, "screen time" remains limited, reading routines stay in place and meals remain around the same time.

5. Ask the School or Program for Activities You Can Work on At Home over Breaks

It is also a good idea to ask teachers or therapists for activities you can do with your child over holiday breaks. This can help you establish a routine, help you see what your child is working on and assess whether he or she is generalizing the skills being administered in school.

6. Take Two Cars

It is always a good idea to have an escape plan for holiday activities. My husband and I always bring two cars to gatherings or activities, so that one of us can leave if our child with special needs is acting up. This way our other children can remain (if they wish), and our child with special needs can go home where he feels more comfortable.

7. Plan Activities Where There is No Expectation that Your Special Needs Loved One Has to Behave

I try to focus on activities that our family can do together where there are no expectations that my son needs to behave. Each Christmas day, my children dress up like elves. We visit friends with developmental disabilities at our local group homes with presents we've purchased and wrapped. This allows our family to "do good," have a fun Christmas activity, and allows my son with special needs the opportunity to be himself with no worries. My children all look forward to this activity each holiday season and it has become our holiday tradition!

8. Try to Schedule Ample Help

If possible, I try to schedule extra help to assist me during the holiday season. This extra help may take the form of a "mother's helper," a babysitter, a local college student, someone to come along with us to activities and gatherings. This helper can watch my son with special needs when there are activities that I want the rest of my family to attend but are not a good fit for my son with special needs.

9. Avoid Crowds

Avoid activities where there are huge crowds. Whenever possible, I try to do my holiday shopping online to avoid the busy malls. One of the holiday activities my son loves is the train show at the Botanical Gardens. In order to avoid the large crowds, we often go on a rainy weekday when most people are not visiting. If I must attend an event or location that will be crowded, and one that I know my child with special needs will not enjoy (such as a yearly trip to the Rockefeller Christmas tree), I make sure to bring my "mother's helper."

10. Use the Time with Family to Discuss Plans for the Future

Holiday time is a wonderful time to discuss your plans for the future for your loved one with special needs. It is a good time for your extended family members to see, first hand, what it takes to raise your loved one. Use these family gatherings to discuss issues such as guardianship and other special needs planning ideas.

11. Keep Calm

One thing that upsets me is getting parenting advice from people who think they know how to handle behaviors better than I do. This happens often during the holiday season. For the sake of my son, I try to (and thankfully succeed at) remaining calm. I use these as teachable moments, such as the day I was at the Bronx Zoo with my son and a group of young students started mimicking his vocalizations and hand movements. While my instinct was to yell at these children for being painfully

rude, I instead spoke to the teacher about my son and the student reactions. I was happy to explain what autism was to them.

12. Don't be Afraid to Say No

Don't be afraid to say "no," to anything that does not contribute to your own or your child's well-being. People who care about you will not be offended if you decline an invitation. Simply explain that it will not work for your special family. Figure out which events and activities are must-dos and let go of the rest. Maybe opt for a quiet night at home instead.

13. Take Time for Yourself

I can't stress the importance of this enough. This helps you be a better parent. If you spot me alone in a movie or getting a manicure and pedicure this holiday season, you will notice that I strongly take my own advice!

14. Keep Expectations Reasonable

We tend to have high expectations for the holidays and want them to be "perfect" family times. Don't get frustrated if the occasions don't go as planned. Just cherish the time you do have and make the best of it. If your child with special needs cannot handle a large family event on a certain day, plan something special just for your family and enjoy the time alone.

15. Count Your Blessings

While it is so hard to raise a loved one with special needs, and while we may wish to just have a "normal" holiday season and not worry about all of the above, holiday time is an important time to realize all of the gifts we have been given via the gift of our child(ren). I always take time to realize that I have become a better mother, a more patient person and a better advocate in my career of helping families with special needs. I am a better person and it is all because of my son. This makes me feel very lucky indeed.

Happy Holidays!