

MAKING THE HOLIDAYS HAPPY FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

School

Visual Supports/Routines

- Present the upcoming holiday in a visual manner through use of a calendar; e.g. mark the days at home in one color and days at school in a different color. Pair this with:
- Social stories that describe upcoming holiday schedule changes
- Maintain visual daily schedule and incorporate any holiday event changes within the schedule (e.g. change in music schedule, rearrangement of classes, upcoming holiday concerts.) Strive to maintain consistent and familiar routines for the student with ASD.
- Rehearse the schedule in advance with the child (especially changes in routine)
- Consider giving the student additional breaks in their day throughout the holiday season; it will be especially for the student to have a means of requesting a break during this time.
- Develop social stories that will assist the child in participating in holiday programs. Include information concerning where the students will sit and stand, who will be standing beside them, who will be in the audience, etc.
- Prior to the holiday break, start preparing for class changes, block changes, and new semester calendar.

Sensory

- Be alert to additional sensory processing pressures during this time such as lights, glitter, holiday sounds/music, and smells. Consult with the school O.T. or C.O.T.A. for recommendations as to how these potential sensory overloads might be handled.
- Additional sensory diet activities might be employed during breaks.
- Gradually decorate the classroom to lessen the change to the environment.
- In art activities, consider that fact that some children avoid messy materials due to sensory differences. Encourage gradual exposure at the child's pace or rate.

Curriculum

- Include in your reading sessions and play sessions stories about giving and receiving presents; rehearse appropriate responses can be rehearsed during that time.
- Model good manners such as saying, "Thank you," and responding positively when the present is not what the child expected.
- Pre-teach and role play turn-taking activities related to giving and receiving gifts.

- At snack, explore different foods that the child may experience during the holiday season.
- Pre-teach specific roles for the student during holiday activities such as class parties, Santa visit, music programs, i.e. passing out candy canes, setting the table, assisting in preparation for the music program, or developing and utilizing an audience participation sign.

Home

Visual Supports/Routine

- Prepare a holiday schedule. Plan structured activities and events for each day and make sure they are on the schedule.
- Develop social stories about the relatives who might be visiting. Include pictures if possible.
- Consider developing specific social scripts of tasks to help your child participate in holiday celebrations. For example, greet each guest by handing him or her an ornament for the tree or take their coat and putting it on the bed or in the closet.
- If your child has difficulty with wrapped presents because he or she does not understand what is inside, consider wrapping them in cellophane (this way he or she can unwrap the gift yet still see what is inside); draw the item on the gift tag; or put a catalog picture on the gift tag.
- Try to avoid canceling regular activities; maintain as much of the normal household routine as possible.
- Make a concerted effort to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. Also consider the need for consistency in medication and mealtimes.
- Attempt to complete holiday shopping and other planning activities within your regular errand routine. Set up respite options before and during the holiday season.
- Do not allow your child's bedroom to become the guestroom for out-of-town visitors.
- Consider the use of a "mini-schedule" to prepare the child for the day's events, particularly when making long trips (e.g. car, McDonald's, gas, rest stop, Grandma's house.)
- Decide if a transition object/picture, photo would be helpful to communicate that your child will not be sleeping/staying at home for that evening. A sleeping bag could be used to show her that she will be sleeping at Grandma's house that evening.
- If staying at home, consider asking relatives to stagger visits to your home.

Sensory

- Determine the activities that are calming and enjoyable for your child and keep these activities in his or her daily schedule.

- Designate a break area or home base area in your home or the home in which you will be staying. Represent this area in object/photo/PIC symbol format so that the child will understand where he or she can request to go if necessary.
- Problem solve ways to avoid crowds or congested areas if they are troublesome to your child.
- When going to a restaurant, sit in a remote area or separate room.
- Develop and keep a sensory overload emergency kit based on recommendations developed by the O.T. or C.O.T.A.
- When selecting holiday outfits, respect the child's desire for certain textures.
- Pre-warn family members that your child has a more pleasant experience when he or she is allowed to determine whether and/or when to hug or kiss other people.
- Have an awareness of the possible increase in variety and intensity of aromas during the holidays. Consider limiting scented candles, potpourri, real trees and garland, as these odors may overload the child's olfactory system.
- Gradually decorate your home and tree to allow the child to adjust to the change and to the sensory information.
- Pre-teach the present-opening routine, including what the child may and may not open. Allow some flexibility as the child explores new wrapping materials.
- Consider your child's sensory needs when selecting presents. For example, toys should be visually plain, i.e. lacking in busy patterns (this allows the child to concentrate on the function of the toy rather than becoming distracted by the visual aspects); toys that have parts that nest or assemble easily; jigsaw puzzles should be chunky and lie flat and have a definite fit (some children with ASD have fine motor difficulties that make assembly difficult and frustrating).
- Consider bringing favorite food choices for your child to holiday events.

Other

- Because of your child's possible difficulties with recognizing and being sensitive to the feelings of others, provide opportunities for your child to open presents from other people in the presence of immediate family only. Model appropriate responses (e.g. "thank you," "that was kind of you," smiles directed to others, etc.)
- Be prepared to answer questions that family or friends may pose related to your son or daughter's specific needs during the holidays. Use this as an opportunity to enrich their understanding of autism spectrum disorders.

After Holiday Vacation

- Be sure to prepare individual's daily schedule for the child's return to regular routine.
- Avoid having substitutes during the first week back to school. If this cannot be avoided, be certain that a social story or similar preparation is completed to assist the child in adapting to the change.
- Continue the increased number of breaks in the child's daily schedule as he or she transitions back into the daily routine.
- Be sure to place specific emphasis on scheduled times to review past and future events.