

As the days grow shorter and leaves fall, families everywhere start planning for the holiday season ahead. Parents of children on the autism spectrum may wonder whether this is their most or least favorite time of year. No matter what religious or cultural traditions your family honors, the good news is that those traditions will involve welcoming rituals and predictability, and will emphasize caring relationships – all of which are key to keeping children with autism safely within their comfort zone. The bad news, of course, is that these calming aspects of the holidays can be lost in the onslaught of too much excitement, too much sensation, and too many people. As one person with autism, Jessica Park, famously put it many decades ago (in a book written by her mother and titled *The Siege*), some things are just “too good.” Her experience was that too much of anything, even something generally considered happy and fun, caused her pain and distress. This is truly the time of year for keeping that insight firmly in mind.

Multiple offspring on the autism spectrum have taught me a thing or two about managing the holidays, and reminded me that the choice between holiday peace and holiday overload is usually in our hands. Here are a few pointers:

1. **Respect the sensory sensitivities of autism!** What is exciting and desirable for many children may terrify or overwhelm a child on the spectrum. Consider what you know about your child’s sensory system and plan accordingly. Don’t forget about using the Sensory Diet just because it is not a school day.
 2. **Keep to a familiar schedule as much as possible**, especially regarding hours of sleep, mealtimes, and free time to “chill out.” Give your child a written or picture schedule so that he or she can anticipate how each day will go. Offer your child choices and control, especially over new situations; for example, if you are visiting a relative’s house with which your child does not feel familiar, ask the relative to help your child identify a quiet place to go for needed down time.
 3. **Maintain a part of your house that is not decorated**, and is therefore totally familiar. Decorations are great, but if every wall, door, stair rail, and tabletop suddenly looks different the experience can be disorienting.
 4. **Provide familiar, tried-and-true comfort foods**, even among the fancier and more exotic holiday fare. Many children with autism have food and sensory sensitivities that make traditional holiday foods unappealing to them, and a child who leaves the table hungry is likely to fill up at the cookie tray and spend the rest of the day in a sugar high.
 5. **Beware of the onset of illness**, which is likely to occur over the holidays due to exposure to crowds and new people, as well as overall stress. All too often, adults may interpret as “bad behavior” what is actually the early warning sign of an illness. Children with autism often cannot read or interpret their bodies’ signals until they become very sick; parents are more likely to spot early symptoms.
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6. **Reconsider the issue of holiday clothes:** are they scratchy, too tight, hard to relax in, really necessary at all? Consider asking your child to put them on just for that special photo for Grandma, and then allow him or her to change into something that does not irritate the senses.

7. **Remember that the “Hidden Curriculum” does not apply only to school;** holidays have a Hidden Curriculum too. Parents and teachers have learned that no daily expectation should “go without saying” – children on the spectrum need to have a clear explanation of what is really happening and why. This is especially true when it comes to once-a-year traditions, the origins and meaning of which are not at all obvious to a child with autism. For example, finding out that a complete stranger is going to enter their house in the night may sound like a dangerous invasion to a child on the spectrum, and lead to unnecessary anxiety.

8. **Support your child to “be in the box marked give, not just the box marked take.”** These are the words of an adult with autism, Barbara Moran. She reminds us that all people with disabilities need to experience the reciprocity of giving to and helping others, rather than merely being the object of others’ kindness. Many parents tell of how their children blossomed when asked to help with a holiday food or toy campaign, to take meals to a sick neighbor, and to participate in honoring the true spirit of the season.

9. **Bring closure to the holidays in a satisfying way.** Many children, with autism or without, feel depressed and disoriented when this season ends. For children on the spectrum, however, transitioning to a different set of activities can be a special challenge. In my house we adopted an old ritual of celebrating “Twelfth Night” (look it up!) with a special cake, and this helped them to envision a happy but definitive conclusion to the holidays. While they did not like to see the decorations come down (and I usually did this while they were back in school) they did like to see where they were stored, and seemed to feel reassured that nothing was gone or lost forever. We did not talk about “how long until next year” because long periods of time are difficult for many children with autism to grasp, and such discussions can make them anxious. Instead, we homed in on the next big thing to look forward to: snow (which usually starts in January in our part of the country). We filled some of the empty spaces where holiday decor had been with snow-themed arts and crafts (such as fold-and-cut snowflakes), and got their minds and imaginations focused on the good times at hand.

For all of us, keeping our holiday expectations in check and staying focused and mindful “in the moment” can be the best way to enjoy this time of year. May you and your family enjoy a peaceful season!

Pat Amos, 10/23/12
