

Handling the Holidays with a Child on the Autism Spectrum

By [Lisa Jo Rudy](#), About.com

Question: Handling the Holidays with a Child on the Autism Spectrum

Everyone around me seems to be shopping for holiday toys that mean nothing to my child with autism. I'd like to enjoy the season, but how can I even plan for a holiday with a child who prefers the ribbons on the box to the age-appropriate toys inside? Holiday stress is tough enough, but this is making me crazy.

Answer: From Dr. Cindy Ariel:

Holidays are often filled with stress. It takes work to make a beautiful and fun holiday for yourself and those around you. There is a lot of pressure to make the holidays perfect and fun, and to enjoy yourself while you're doing it. This is a tall order in any situation, but when you add to that the stress of having a child with special needs for whom you also want the holidays to be perfect and fun, it can become more overwhelming than ever.

Everything needs readjusting in your family life these days, and of course you are left with the emotions of it all. It is on you to make warm experiences for your family and new traditions that will help them to feel good about these family years. It's a huge adjustment. It's important at this time to sit back for a few minutes and backtrack just a little. What is it about the holidays that you've always enjoyed? Special foods? Pretty decorations? Certain activities? The gifts? All of it? Whatever it is, start there.

Focus on a few things you know are important to make sure you have prepared around this time. Of course, some things may need modification so that it is possible to enjoy them with your child with special needs. For example, if there is a danger of them hurting themselves on fragile decorations you may have to put them higher up and out of reach, or get new ones that are not so fragile. Some special foods may not be able to be served. These modifications often bring us disappointment but if the goal is a nice family holiday, it's important and we can adjust.

Make the demands on yourself realistic and don't try to do so much that you feel only frustration. Make realistic lists and work on things one at a time. Looking at a whole month of this holiday season is less overwhelming if you take it in small pieces. You may also have to lower your expectations of what you can really do, but at least what you do will be less stressful and make the holidays special.

Now for tackling the gifts. Again, you may have to step back and change your expectations. Think about your child and what will put a smile on his/her face. Maybe they can't handle the new games that every other kid is playing this year, or the current popular book series, or new sports equipment. But they may be thrilled with a cushy new ball, a big soft beanbag chair to flop on, a favorite food (within their dietary constraints), or even an hour away from all the noise and confusion to walk in brisk weather or slide in the playground. It's not what you hoped, but this part is not just about you. It's about how you can give everyone in your family some warm holiday experiences, and feel good about them and yourself in the process.

These may not be the holidays you once had, or dreamed of for your family. But you can still offer your family the love and warmth and smiles that the holiday glow that many of us carry within us is really all about.

From Dr. Robert Naseef:

Whenever I talk with parents, no other question is pregnant with quite so much emotion. No matter what tradition you celebrate—Chanukah, Christmas, Ramadan, or Kwanza—this can be a difficult time of year. Images of warm cozy family life fill our heads. It's a time to be close, to give thanks, and to look forward. It's a time to celebrate the lives of children, a time that families get together and assess where they are, notice changes and remember losses. There are many dimensions to the holiday season as visions of our own childhood holidays dance in our heads, but there is a special twist when your child is not developing typically. How we handle these times can set us up for a depressing winter season, or it can be an opportunity for growth and love. To grow, we have to acknowledge the often painful loss of the child we dreamed of and the challenges of having a child who is very different from what we imagined. After all, what parent doesn't look forward and envision an excited child having fun with new toys?

A thoughtful mother told me how she was enjoying the holidays this year as opposed to watching her son ignore his toys while she wept. She had learned to be "realistic" now that her son who has autism is four. She wanted to buy him that first remote controlled car for four-to-six year olds, but instead she bought him some toys labeled 12-18 months that she knew he would enjoy. She also knows she will enjoy him this way, and she has the hope that he will develop from where he is, especially by becoming interested and having fun interacting with the rest of the family.

This woman loves her son dearly and has learned through her tears and grief to dream new dreams. She is now looking forward to being on the floor with him and following his lead in play. This process of letting go and moving on takes time, but most people do get there. Children with special needs have so much to teach their parents and the rest of society, particularly about accepting our differences and living in peace and harmony.

Holiday time is exciting for children, and children with special needs are no different. About 10-12 percent of school-aged children have disabilities and will receive holiday gifts this season. As opposed to wishing and pushing for a child to be normal, acceptance of the child where he or she is encourages further development. This brings us to an important lesson that all children can teach us in this current season for giving. More than the new toys, it is their parents' time and attention that is so exciting and wonderful for children. It is the fuel for their development into kind and giving little people. In the consumer-driven rush this holiday season, let's not forget what's really important. Let's connect with mind and heart to our families and friends and all whose lives we touch. Let's spend quality time together. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote many years ago, "The only true gift is a portion of thyself."

Robert Naseef, Ph.D., and Cindy Ariel, Ph.D., are the co-editors of "Voices from the Spectrum: Parents, Grandparents, Siblings, People With Autism, and Professionals Share Their Wisdom" (2006). On the web at www.alternativechoices.com.

HOLIDAYS, AUTISM, ASPERGERS & YOUR CHILD

There are many issues with Autism Spectrum Disorders that can add to the stress of a family holiday – disruption to normal routines, behavioral issues and unfamiliar sights, sounds, foods, and people. The good news is that some careful planning and organizing can make a more pleasurable holiday for everyone.

Family gatherings

If you are having relatives over, or visiting them for the holiday, planning and organization will take care of many potential problems.

The first question to ask yourself is whether your child will cope with disruptions to routines and sensory overload from loud conversations, cigarette smoke, perfume, hugs, and having strange people around. Obviously you will want your child to be able to deal with these issues eventually, but parents need to be realistic and decide on how many behavioral issues they are willing to tolerate, and impose on others, in the quest for the big family dinner for Christmas or other festivities. You can always explain the problems involved to family members so they won't take offence, and wait until your child is ready to cope better.

Preparation is the key

Prepare your child well in advance. If possible, have photos of all the people they will be meeting, and give your child information on them so that they will feel they know something about the person already. These could be incorporated into a wall chart that counts down the days to the family get together.

Social stories could be used to explain to your child that the environment will be noisy and boisterous at times, and things your child can do to cope with this, such as asking parents for some quiet time.

If you are going to someone else's house and it isn't too far away, you could go there a week early so that your child can familiarize themselves with the environment. This also gives you a chance to check the house for possible dangers to your child.

Remember to take your child's favorite toys and games on the big day, so that there is something routine still in the midst of all the chaos. It may also be worth having a chart of the day's events if your child likes to know what will happen next. If your child needs constant supervision, make sure someone is always committed to watching your child. After a few drinks or lively conversations, it is easy to think someone is watching your child when the opposite is true.

Telling relatives about autism or Aspergers

Discussing your child's Autism Spectrum Disorder with others is a personal choice. Some parents have no qualms about letting others know, as they can then create some public awareness of the issues involved, and also show the other person that unusual behaviors are not necessarily wilful misbehavior. Other parents would rather not say anything unless circumstances get so bad that they need to explain their child's behavior. In an ideal world, all relatives are wonderful compassionate people who will make the necessary adjustments to share their lives with your child unconditionally. But we all know some people will refuse to understand the issues and judge your child harshly. Use your intuition to decide which relatives you tell about your child being on the autistic spectrum.

Going away on holidays

Autism-friendly places

In many countries, some accommodation providers are now catering for various disabilities. Your nearest autism association may have a list of any such places, as well as any government programs that might provide funding for your holiday. If there are no specialist accommodation services, there may be child care facilities where you can ring ahead and see if the staff have any knowledge or experience with Autism Spectrum Disorders, or if they will manage with some advice beforehand.

If your child has sensory problems such as sensitivity to noise, see if you can reserve accommodation that is quiet and relatively secluded. If you are traveling by plane or train, you can often ring the transport provider so that staff are aware of any problems that might arise.

When sensory issues are involved, it can be worth bringing along your child's normal sheets and pillows in case they find those in a hotel unpleasant. Any new clothes for the trip may need to be washed several times if your child finds these 'scratchy' on the skin.

Preparing your child

Children on the autistic spectrum are usually prone to stress and disruption to routines. However, they often are much more able to cope when they have an idea of what to expect. Spend some time each day telling them what they can expect on the holiday, and where possible show them pictures from brochures or websites.

Social stories are an excellent way to smooth over anticipated problems. For example, if your child is going to resent sharing a swimming pool with other noisy children, a social story can present this as a fun opportunity to meet other children, and how to quietly leave the pool if the noise is overwhelming. If your child has never been on an aeroplane before, a social story can show how to cope with noisy airports, crowded planes and takeoffs. Images are very helpful so see if you can get photos of a plane's interior to put in the story.

Prepare a chart of what your child will be doing each day so that a new routine is quickly established while on holiday. Create this chart with your child as a fun experience by cutting and pasting pictures to go with different activities. This timetable can go on the wall so that there are less unexpected surprises that could create undue stress. If your child doesn't have a calendar, make a special one so that the days to the holiday can be counted off in preparation.

Flying

Given the confines of an aircraft, it is worth considering whether you want to take the risk of flying. If driving or catching trains is a possibility, then weigh these against the chances of your child having a full blown 'melt down' in a crowded cabin with no chance of escape until the plane lands!

Airlines have become much more sensitive to the issues faced by people with various disabilities. For example, if your child will not be able to tolerate a noisy airport, that may be able to arrange for you to bypass any queues. You should also have the option of either boarding first or last, if either reduces the stress on your child. There will be a choice of seating arrangements, such as the first row where there will be less visual distractions, or exit rows which will have more room. Airlines often cater for special diets, so see if they will have meals to suit your child, or take your own. If you are flying internationally, make sure there won't be problems with any medications – for example, stimulant medications for Attention Deficit Disorder could create problems at customs in certain countries. It can be hard to know if the deep rumble of jets will be comforting or alarming for your child, but having their favorite music playing through headphones, as well as favorite toys, can help to calm your child.

Managing behavioral issues

Disruptions to normal routines will often result in more behavioral issues so it will be important to apply your management strategies consistently. If you are traveling to another country, it may help to learn a phrase or two that can explain your child is autistic and not simply having a tantrum if you have major problems in a public space. An alternative could be to have these phrases written on a card.

School Tips For The Holidays

Preparing children with Autism for any holiday is a very important pro-active task for all staff members. Be aware that many changes at school and at home may cause stress for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Here are some potential problems and possible strategies:

1. Classroom parties:
 - a. Have an alternate party for students who may have difficulty handling a typical party. (Less students, less noise, etc.)
 - b. Write a Social Story to prepare students for the party.
 - c. Use a “Break Card” to allow students to leave to a designated area if the party becomes too over stimulating.
2. Holiday Crafts (Sensory):
 - a. Be aware that certain aromas may bother students with Autism. (Gingerbread smell, peppermint, cinnamon, etc)
 - b. Certain textures can affect them as well, such as glue, glitter, anything gooey.
 - c. Certain visual things like lights can affect students, especially blinking, flashing, twinkling lights.
3. Foods and Snacks:
 - a. Find out from the parents in advance what the student with Autism likes and dislikes.
 - b. Be aware of any possible allergies.
4. Sounds:
 - a. Some students with Autism like instrumental music only. Others like music with words. Be aware what works best for your student.
 - b. If classroom sounds are too loud, ear plugs, ear muffs or ear phones can be used to help. Find out what works best for your student.
5. Classroom Schedules:
 - a. Have a visual schedule to alert the student to any changes.
 - b. Write a Social Story to explain the changes with the routine schedule.
 - c. Prepare your student for their return from Christmas Break:
 - 1) Prepare, before break, for any class changes that might occur, such as teacher changes or room changes, etc...
 - 2) Make a Count Down Calendar for showing the days till school begins.
 - 3) Send home Social Stories for parents to review.
 - 4) Place a picture on the calendar of the teacher/friend(s)/school.

Tips were created by the Autism Team in Decatur Township.

Holiday Tips for Families Living with Autism

The holiday period can be a stressful time for those on the autism spectrum because it is a breach in their daily routine. However, if we anticipate the holidays and what they entail before they arrive, the person with autism can be made more comfortable and at ease—ensuring joy for all throughout the holidays!

At ASA, all tips are transferable—pass them along! These tips can be easily adapted by a parent, a friend, a sibling or any family member. Try them out with your loved one on the spectrum. A few tips can really pay off big.

“Everyone in the car!” Starting Off on Successful Outings

- To help day trips run more smoothly, travel in two cars so that one person can return home with your loved one on the autism spectrum if he/she gets distressed.
- Eat before leaving home or bring food with you.
- Bring a quiet toy, like a calculator, to a restaurant, during religious services or other social activity.

“We are going to Grandma’s!” Tips for Social Gatherings

- When going to large social gatherings, arrive early to let the person on the autism spectrum get accustomed to the growing number of people.
- If he/she becomes distressed during a social gathering, pick a quiet place to go or take him out for a walk.
- When visiting someone’s home, ask to remove breakables from reach; think carefully about visiting those who refuse to accommodate your request.
- Bring a preferred item, favorite toys or stuffed animals to a family gathering or other social event.
- Before going to a family event, look at individual pictures of family members and teach him/her their names.
- Before going to a social event, use “social stories” and practice simple courtesy phrases and responses to questions, either verbal, with pictures, or gestures. (“How are you?” “I am fine.” “How is school?” “Good.”)
- Let trusted others spend time with your child if they volunteer.
- Ask for help if you need it. Families and friends are often eager to participate.

“Do we have to go to the mall???” Shopping Without Stress

- To help your loved one with autism get used to malls, go early before the stores open. Walk around, get familiar with the building, buy a snack when the stores open, and leave. Extend the amount of time at the mall each time you go.
- When shopping, be positive and give small rewards, such as a piece of candy, for staying with you.
- To teach your child not to touch things when shopping, visit a clothing store or another store with unbreakable objects; this gives him/her an opportunity to model behavior and minimize risk.
- When shopping, bring a helper to have an extra set of eyes and hands until you are confident of a safe experience.
- Provide headphones or earplugs to the person with autism spectrum to moderate the noise and activity around them.

Going to Worship Services

- Talk with the worship leader about what he/she might expect and how the congregation might support the family.
- Arrange for a friend or neighbor to come with you to stay with siblings should the person with autism spectrum need to leave during the worship service.
- Bring a quiet object of concentration, such as a rubber band, pictures, books, or an object of visual focus, can be very helpful, particularly if it has religious significance to enhance the worship experience.
- Have the child or adult on the spectrum help out. Depending on their ability, they can:
 - Greet people with a smile, and hand out service bulletins.
 - Gather up the bulletins and papers left in the pews after the service, restoring order to the sanctuary.
 - Assist in holiday volunteer activities of the congregation, such as the delivery of cards, toys or food.
- For detailed tips for worship services, read our [Living with Autism](#) series.

Above all...

Be Consistent. Remember to apply the techniques used to involve the person with autism in daily activities to these special activities.

Discuss your expectations. Unwelcome surprises are never fun for anyone.

Be prepared and stand firm. Accept well-meaning but unwanted advice with the phrase, "I'll have to think about that," and smile.

Be safe and have fun!

Enjoy the holiday season!

Your friends at the Autism Society of America