

Preparing for the Holidays

Helping Special Needs Families Through Practical Tips



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Oh, the holidays are approaching again...

This time of year can be filled with fun, family parties, great food, nostalgic movies, traditions, and maybe some presents. This time of year can also create a wave of stress... a lot of stress. More crowds, more events to attend and prepare for, more decorations and distractions, time off school/work/therapies - the list goes on. For special needs families, this might be an understatement. In our families, this time of year often requires extra preparation, organization, and logistical planning in order to keep stress to a minimum. Let's take a look at some examples of how special needs families can maximize the holiday cheer:



Prepare Ahead

Teach valuable skills your child will benefit from having now so he/she can participate in holiday activities

- Motor skills- practicing with a dreidel, crafting, unwrapping presents, wrapping presents
- Language skills- manners (please, thank you), following instructions (don't touch)
- Academic- buying presents, baking, counting up on an Advent calendar
- Social skills- turn taking, sharing, gift giving, playing games
- Self-help skills- tolerating winter clothing, trying new foods, sitting at the table

Plan traditions carefully

Decor tips:

- Set presents out right before opening to reduce temptation
- Involve your child in decorating
- Add decorations slowly or reduce what you put out this year
- Be mindful of safety (plastic vs glass ornaments, fake vs real menorah candles)

Celebration tips:

- Practice being around more stimuli (smells, candles, music etc.)
Put a picture of the present recipient instead of name tags so your child can participate in gift giving independently

if he/she cannot read

- Wrap up familiar toys/gifts if your child is overwhelmed by new/unknown items
- Buy presents with a "teacher eye"
- Prepare an event book of past pictures/descriptions to help your child anticipate this year's festivities
- Use a visual schedule/calendar to set expectations (when the tree is coming/going)
- Practice going to religious ceremonies, stake out a spot, plan an escape route

Keep protocols running

- Work with teachers/therapists to help you prepare
- Ask for help from your support network to keep things consistent
- Keep exclusive reinforcers handy (items, toys, snacks that are highly motivating but restricted access) for the long car rides and behavior expectations during events/parties

The Day of...

- Define social expectations for your child
- Define social expectations for the caregivers to alleviate confusion and frustration (e.g., take turns between child monitoring/play facilitation vs family/friend socializing.)
- Pack games, food, snacks
- Eat ahead of time to avoid dinnertime struggles
- Brief family members of any special requests (pets out of the room, lower the

music, need a quiet place for a home base, etc.)

- Give yourself a pep talk- you are prepared and doing the best you can. This is your holiday too!

During the festivities

- Stake out a quiet spot for your child to retreat to if needed
- Introduce your child slowly to family/friends
- Use a concrete visual aid (e.g., an ornament) to signal when it's someone's turn to open their present
- Watch for behavioral precursors, as they may come up more quickly in stressful situations
- Give tasks/jobs so your child feels included (e.g., help in the kitchen)
- Allow staggered gift giving or reserve for home when it's calmer
- Inform unfamiliar/new people of your child's needs and how to act around them (e.g., tell Santa at the mall to talk with your child in a way that your child understands and feels comfortable)
- Watch for safety hazards as not all environments or homes are child/baby proofed the way your child is used to
- Reserve special one-on-one time for your child to help him/her feel safe
- Allow breaks or give special roles during eating if your child can't sit for long periods (e.g., the "roll passer" or the table interviewer)
- Enjoy yourself!

Overall, this time of year can be sprinkled with stressful scenarios and while we can't prevent everything, practicing, preparing, and planning ahead can help to make for a smoother holiday season. We invite you to reflect on some of the above tips to see how you can personalize them to your family and the holiday you enjoy. And as

always, don't forget to check back into your Rethink account or sign up for your free tele-consultations to further discuss how to make this season a stress-free one for your family. Happy Holidays!

Resources:

- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/blog/2013/11/19/holiday-tips-kids-autism-spectrum-disorders>
- <http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2011/12/20/how-to-prepare-your-child-with-special-needs-for-CHANUKAH/>
- <http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2012/12/12/13-holiday-survival-tips-for-your-child-with-special-needs/>
- <http://themighty.com/2015/11/how-an-autism-family-prepares-for-thanksgiving/>
- [https://www.noerrprograms.com/-Caring Santa](https://www.noerrprograms.com/-Caring-Santa)

