

Autism and Christmas. Preparation is key.

Autism and Christmas are not always the best of friends. Christmas can be a stressful time for any family; however, especially so for families with an autistic family member. Changes in usual routines, heightened expectations and possible sensory overloads can all add to anxieties and a sense of being overwhelmed.

Preparation is key

We must remember that every individual with autism is different and every family is different. Each family will have its own traditions and its own priorities. For some families, it is a rare occasion to enjoy seeing members of the extended family. For others it is a time to share only with the immediate family. Some might not have family and choose to spend it with friends or even alone. Whatever your situation, decide well in advance what your own priorities are and ask yourself the following questions.

People



1. Who are the people we need to spend time with over Christmas?
2. How long do we need to spend time with those who do not form part of our daily lives?
3. How is everyone's behaviour going to change – how we greet people, how much we eat, how much louder/quieter we will speak?

Environment

1. How much of the house will be decorated?
2. Will there be Christmas-free zones?
3. What sort of lights will be used?
4. Will there be extra sounds, eg Christmas songs playing?
5. How will the shops we visit change - seasonal goods, seasonal music, bands playing?

Routines

1. How will routines change – daily, weekly?
2. How will television programmes change?
3. Will you spend more time at home or less time at home?
4. When will routines be restored?

Priorities

1. Who are the people you must absolutely see?
2. Which decorations must you absolutely have?
3. Which shops must you absolutely visit and can you shop online instead?
4. Which routines must absolutely be changed?

Planning

Once you have established what your Christmas will look like and what are your priorities, you need to plan well in advance to help the autistic member of the family to prepare and to reduce anxieties and confusion.

1. Prepare a story of the run-up to Christmas, possibly using photographs of previous Christmases. The format of the story will depend on the communication levels of the individual and could be in hard copy or on a tablet, using their favoured communication tools.
2. Prepare a count-down timetable. The length of the countdown will depend very much on the individual. Some need to see a timetable well in advance; others will become too anxious if they know too long in advance. The more visual the timetable, the better eg picture boards, calendars.
3. Find out when are the best times to shop. Many people on the autism spectrum dislike crowds and quiet times are better, so find out when those quiet times are.
4. When out and about, find out beforehand where you can go for some quiet space if things become overwhelming for the individual with autism, eg pop into the local library, go to a quiet waiting area in a public place, ask a local hotel if they have a quiet room.
5. Prepare resources to take with you that can reduce sensory overloads, eg earplugs, dark glasses.
6. Be ready with a favourite item that can reduce anxieties in the individual, eg sensory toys.
7. Remember to prepare for the end of Christmas as well as the run-up to Christmas using stories and countdowns.



Above all do not put too much pressure on yourself or your autistic family member and try to enjoy yourselves!

If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.

