



Tips for having an autism-friendly Christmas

Christmas is just around a corner so we've put together a list of tips for having an autism-friendly Christmas. Please let us know if it is helpful for you. Thanks to everyone on the forums, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit who shared their thoughts, experiences and suggestions – we really appreciate it. We hope you have a merry Christmas!

Preparation and routine

- Accept – and be relaxed about – a different sort of Christmas which might include things like only short visits to family
- Plan and discuss everything with your child in advance – “planned surprises” can work best
- Have a regular Christmas Day routine that you use every year
- One parent on Twitter suggests: "Don't have a big family gathering"
- Have a countdown chart so your child can see exactly how long to wait for Christmas. Mark it with key events – the day the tree is going up, the day the tree is coming down, the day you open the presents, the day Grandma is coming etc.
- Ask people to phone ahead so there are no surprise visits on Christmas day
- For the day itself, produce an easy read schedule of events and schedule some quiet time
- Have a quiet room where your child can go to if they are feeling overwhelmed. If you are at someone else's house, make sure there is a designated quiet room there too
- A person with autism on Reddit: "My family usually had 3-5 smaller Christmas parties leading up to the big one, for family and friends who couldn't make the big one. This cut down on people at the big one, and let me practice in a slightly less stressful alternatives"
- A parent on Facebook: "We let our daughter do things at her pace; we don't get her up until she's ready and then put an old familiar DVD on. We let her 'ignore' her presents until she chooses something she likes the look of - usually a clear tub/jar of sweeties!"

Presents

- Buy your child presents related to their interests and encourage friends/family members also to do so
- Choose and wrap the presents together. No surprises means less anxiety. One parent remarks on Twitter: "Took me years to realise my son hated surprises and needed to know exactly what he was getting"
- Let your child choose the wrapping paper for their presents
- Noisy toys and wrapping paper can cause upset without warning
- Allow your child to open presents gradually over a few days. Don't overwhelm them first thing on Christmas Day
- Wrap presents in easy to open (with little tape) coverings to avoid tactile sensitivity difficulties



- A parent on Reddit: "We don't put out any presents until Christmas morning when we are going to open them, because it is just too much for him to see all the presents waiting and he can't have them"
- A parent on Facebook: "Make sure the gift is ready to play. We've had many meltdowns due to no batteries!"

Decorations

- Allow your child to choose the decorations for the house and decorate the house with them
- If your child loves lights, put them on the ceiling instead of having a tree
- A parent on Twitter: "My children love lights but the baubles on the tree upset my son; I think its the reflection that stresses him"
- A parent on Reddit: "My kids have their own 3 ft tall fake tree that we take out and decorate (often we decorate it once a day)"
- A parent on Facebook: "My sons have done the tree for years try to involve them as much as possible"
- A parent on Facebook: "My problems started as soon as the tree went up! They would assure me they would like a tree but then became agitated during the process of it going up. Also got upset when it was time for everything to come back down again. The solution was to bring the box with tree down from the loft a few days before. Then did the tree alone apart from if they wanted to add a few things themselves but never pressured them to so they didn't have to see the mess I cause during prep. Then I take decorations down over a period of few days and, hey presto, no tantrums last year."

Food

- Allow your child to choose what food will be served for Christmas dinner
- A parent on Twitter: "I'm planning a special dinner for my daughter of all things she likes to avoid any trauma over the table"
- A parent on the forums: "After many upsetting family Christmas day lunches we now have a buffet. I prepare most of it the day before and keep topping it up all day"
- When going to other people's home for dinner make sure they have dinner ready on time to prevent a meltdown

Advice for people on the spectrum from people on the spectrum

- From Reddit: "Create a Christmas kit to bring to parties. This should include small toys/stimming devices, some treats (if sensory, digestive or allergy issues limit party foods they can eat), a schedule outlining the party and expectations, thank you cards (helps prevent the 'she's ungrateful' reaction I get because my reactions aren't typical), hearing protection/sunglasses/small weighted blanket/other sensory devices,



and instructions on what to do if it gets to be too much (escape route, signal to tell mom or dad you've had enough, etc.)”

- From the forums: “Advice I would give other people on the spectrum would be to take time out if you get overwhelmed, be prepared and have things organised, like food you like, earplugs for noisy relatives etc. (apologies to noisy relatives everywhere...) and also ask if there's anything you can do to help because that a) gives you something structured to do and b) gets you out of some of the socialising!”
- From the forums: “Due to previous experiences of feeling ‘trapped’ at Christmas events – particularly when public transport isn’t running or is limited – my tip to fellow Aspies is to ensure that you have a place to escape to and a means by which to escape, regardless of the weather”
- From the forums: “Plan in advance how to say thank you for presents, even if they are not what you wanted.”
- From the forums: “My parents had developed good mechanisms for helping me with Christmas from about age four or five. I really love Christmas as it's for family and stuff, but too much family at once has always been a big problem for me. I still get stressed with the fuss of rushing about Christmas morning, but when presents are done I retreat to the kitchen and I help my dad. I help buy and choose Christmas dinner too which helps. Having a place to retreat to is always good. Also, planning in advance, and teaching others we aren't meaning to be rude if we forget to be polite.”

We know that Christmas can be a stressful time for people and families so, if you're looking for advice and support, our forums will be open and ready to help you.

www.talkaboutautism.org.uk