

Prepare for a Stress Free Holiday Season

While most children live for the holiday season, it can be an extremely stressful time of year for children with disabilities and their families. The disruption to their routine, unfamiliar sights and smells, the house full of noise and people – it can all prove to be too much. Holidays are all about the family, but it can be hard keeping everyone happy. While the words “stress-free” and the “holidays” don’t often go together, at the Alabama Parent Education Center we want all children to enjoy this special time of year.

TIPS TO PREPARE

To help you prepare for surviving the holiday season, we have compiled the following tips to help you, your family, and your child with a disability have a much happier, reduced stress holiday. Good preparation is the key so here are a few tips to help you prepare yourself, your child, and your family.

Reduce The Stress. Try to find ways to reduce the stress – both on your child and you. Schedule in quiet times and create chill-out zones in your home. Remember, your child will pick up on your stress levels, so try not to over-stretch yourself.

Ask For Help. Friends and family may not know how they can help unless you tell them. Give them a list of things they can do to support you – from looking after your child while you spend quality time with your other children – to helping you finish the holiday meal.

Wrap Up Familiar Toys. If your child is not keen on opening presents because they’re new and unfamiliar, try wrapping up some favorite toys. Sometimes unwrapping something familiar is very reassuring.

Give Your Child A Job And A Schedule. Always give your child a jobs to do at family gatherings. Giving them something to do reduces their stress of having people in the house. I also give them an itinerary so they understand, for example, that people stand around and chat a lot, and that is part of the occasion.

Manage New Smells. Add cinnamon to your child’s play-dough to gradually introduce new smells. One thing that people with autism complain about during the holidays is the many different perfume smells coming from visiting adults. Ask your family and friends to hold off on the perfume.

Work On Gift Giving. Help and encourage the person you are caring for to give gifts. This provides an excellent opportunity to work on social skills, like thinking of other people’s needs and interests, and being kind and helpful. Support your child in making gifts for their family and friends and assisting them in giving out the presents as well.

Reserve Some Special Time For Your Child. It’s easy to get overloaded with festive preparations at this time of year, so plan daily activities to make some special time for your kids – ie. 5 to 10 mins of undivided attention. Let your child take the lead, tune into their world and see it through their eyes.

Create A Weekly Calendar. Print off a week-to-view calendar page from your PC or the internet and add a picture of your planned activities during the holidays (divide into morning, lunch afternoon etc) and this will help put your child at ease about the week ahead.

Prepare Your Family. Talk to family members ahead of time. Discuss your child’s specific needs, and gently but firmly tell them what your plans are. Be sure to let them know that this will make the whole experience better for everyone. Ask for their support.



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Prepare A Bag Of Activities. When you are visiting friends or relatives, fill a backpack with things your child finds comforting or enjoys playing with – toy cars, a stuffed animal, a CD and CD player, ipads, or a few books. If your child gets over stimulated, find a quiet corner or a back room and pull out the backpack.

Easy To Open Presents. If your child has trouble with fine motor skills doctor their cards and presents to allow them to open easily. Makes for a much happier time for all and gives your child a sense of satisfaction that they can complete tasks.

Have a Code Word. Have a code word your child can use if he or she feels overwhelmed and needs a break. Assure your child if he or she uses the code word, you will respond right away. Again, giving children some control during activities that may be over stimulating for them will reduce anxiety.

Prepare Before an Event. Before you leave for holiday parties, parades, or other fun events, have a quick family meeting so your whole family knows how long you plan to stay and how you expect them to behave. This will benefit neuro-typical children as well, since any child can get overwhelmed with the excitement of the holidays. Continue to make your child's sleep schedule a priority, even in the midst of so many special events.

Prepare for Food Allergies. If your children have food sensitivities or allergies that prevent them from eating holiday treats, plan ahead to offer alternatives like all-natural candy or a gluten-free treat from home. Children with neuro-behavioral disorders like ADHD or Autism often already feel different, so be sure to include them in as many holiday festivities as possible.

Limit Holiday Decorations. If your child is easily over-stimulated, limit holiday decorations in your home. Too many twinkling lights combined with smells from the kitchen and other holiday distractions, while enjoyable to most, can be too much for children with autism, ADHD, or sensory disorders. Let special needs children help you decorate for the holidays so they are involved in the changes that take place in their comforting environment.

Sample language

APEC IS HERE TO HELP

APEC provides free training, information, and consultation to families. Visit our training calendar for more information about learning opportunities at www.alabamaparentcenter.com or call our center.

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Alabama Parent Education Center 

PO Box 118 * Wetumpka AL, 36092 * 334-567-2252 * 866-532-7660

www.alabamaparentcenter.com

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