



Paragon Autism
S E R V I C E S
Making a Difference Together

Holiday Tips for Parents

The holidays can be stressful for all of us; however, holidays can be even more stressful for children with special needs and their families. Here are a few tips for parents of children with special needs which may help make the holidays a little less stressful.

1. Begin preparing your child early.
 - a. Read books and social stories about Thanksgiving, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Hanukkah.
 - b. Show your child pictures of people they will see during the holidays and talk about the people.
 - c. Prepare your child for sleepover guests and try not to let anyone sleep in their room.
 - d. Mark important dates on the calendar such as: dates when guests will arrive and depart, dates your family will travel, etc.
 - e. Teach and practice skills ahead of time such as: food acceptance, manners, requesting, requesting a break, etc.
 - f. Expose your child to holiday foods ahead of time.
2. If you are traveling, prepare your child ahead of time.
 - a. Prepare your child with information regarding travel such as:
 - i. what to expect at the airport and on the airplane including: crowds, waiting, security, popping of ears, and uncomfortable feeling in their stomach, etc.
 - ii. what to expect at the train station or on the train such as: waiting, shaking of the train, crowds, etc.
 - iii. what to expect on the car ride such as traffic.
 - b. Pack a backpack with snacks and preferred items to include: earphones for audio-sensitivity, something to play such as games, music, their favorite toy, etc.
 - c. Be prepared to take travel and bathroom breaks.
 - d. Contact your local Sheriff's Department to determine if your child qualifies for Project Lifesaver if your child is not currently enrolled in the program.
3. Be mindful of medical or sensory issues.
 - a. If your child has seizure disorder, blinking lights could induce seizures.
 - i. Limit or reduce exposure to blinking lights. Put steady lights on the tree instead.
 - b. If your child has audio sensitivity, loud music could be painful.
 - i. Reduce the volume of the music.



- ii. Large crowds can be noisy and can also exacerbate social anxiety.
 - c. If your child has olfactory sensitivity, certain smells could be painful.
 - i. Reduce exposure to certain candle scents, food scents, etc. You may may even have to consider an artificial tree. Real trees may even exacerbate allergies.
 - d. If your child has tactile sensitivity, certain food textures and things they touch could be painful. Some foods can be harmful to your child if your child has food allergies.
 - i. Get your child checked out medically if you suspect he/she has food allergies.
 - ii. Work on eating new foods before the holiday.
 - iii. Allow your child to dress comfortably. Tags and various clothing can sometimes irritate your child.
- 4. Whether you are hosting a holiday or traveling, prepare the family and the environment.
 - a. Let family members know about special dietary needs, accommodations, and sensitivities such as your child not liking to be kissed or hugged.
 - b. Let your child wear comfortable clothes instead of their “holiday best”.
 - c. Make environmental modifications:
 - i. Placing your child at the end of the table and close to you or a trusted, patient adult will allow for better supervision, quick departure for a break, and your child will not feel uncomfortably close next to “strangers”.
 - ii. Place hot items and foods for sharing away from your child.
 - d. Allow your child to try different foods if he/she wishes but don’t force it during the holidays.
 - e. Prepare your child’s special foods ahead of time and serve if needed at holiday meals.
 - f. Set aside and practice going to a “quiet break place” which is an area for your child to go if he/she gets overwhelmed. This is a good strategy especially if your child is in an unknown environment.
- 5. Try to keep the schedule the same. This may mean eating holiday meals at the regular time.
- 6. Set realistic expectations. Relax and enjoy the special moments.
 - a. Accept that this year your child may not want to see Santa or maybe he/she will just make it into the same room with Santa for the first time.
 - i. Santa can be confusing. All year long, you tell your child not to approach strangers but during the holidays he/she is told to sit on a strangers lap.
 - ii. Santa may agitate your child’s sensory sensitivity.
 - 1. Santa has a booming voice which may be painful to your child’s ears.
 - 2. Santa’s hair, beard, or suit may irritate your child’s skin.
 - 3. Santa’s smells may irritate your child’s nose.
 - b. Accept that maybe you won’t get a professional family portrait this year but an amateur photograph can capture the moment just fine in a more natural setting.
 - c. Sometimes, staying home and experiencing your “normal” is just the holiday you, your child, and your immediate family members need.
- 7. Remember, the holidays can be very overwhelming for your child and he/she works diligently just to get through the day, party, or visit. Even things we perceive as fun may not be for your child.
 - a. Catch your child doing “good” and praise him/her.
 - b. Praise your child for entering a party. Praise your child for waiting or dealing with a schedule change. Praise your child for eating a specific or new food. Praise your child for sitting on Santa’s lap, or for sitting for the picture.
 - c. Give your child lots of attention and try to spend a few quiet moments with your child during the hectic days to come.