



Happy Holidays 2021

Happy Holidays; a Mother's Perspective



We can all admit that this is a very busy time of the year, and caring for a child on the autism spectrum only makes it harder. We get overwhelmed with decorating, shopping, cooking, and entertaining family and friends. It's no wonder we feel as though we are ignoring our child as he or she plays on electronic devices for the umpteenth hour and/or remains in the house during vacation from school or work without much to do to stimulate them in a positive way.

My wish for all of you this Holiday season is to give yourself some grace, and my advice is to consider allowing your child to enjoy the things that you might normally want to wean them from as they grow older. I'm talking about the things they do and say that we find inappropriate and/or too immature for their chronological age.

For example, my 18-year-old son loves Blue's Clues, but not everyone wants to hear



"The Planet Song" over and over. <Although, on a side note, I highly recommend



listening to this song. It will stick with you FOREVER, and you'll never have to google the order of the planets again. LOL!> Someone once told me that to fully take away things our kids enjoy for entertainment and may need to fulfill sensory issues will only cause anxiety for you and them. Think of something you love to do: exercise, read, binge watch Netflix, go to concerts, etc. Then imagine someone telling you to stop doing that thing completely. Doesn't feel too good, does it? Please consider this idea, and if you still want to limit the amount of time and/or the place these activities and behaviors <such as watching Barney, talking incessantly about certain topics, scripting, flapping, moaning, etc.> are done, you can set a timer and tell your child her or she has "this long" to do the activity, slowly shortening the time.

You can also narrow down the location of where the desired activity is allowed. If it isn't appropriate outside the home, try starting there. He or she can do the activity "only in the house". Then, narrow it down more and more, such as "now, only upstairs", and then "only in your bedroom", and once the craziness of the season is over, maybe you can eliminate the behavior/activity altogether. The bottom line is just to "love 'em where they're at", and allow everyone in your household peace and joy this Holiday season. Good luck.



Sending all of you positive energy and best wishes,
Julie Bollock, AAOM Board Member and Michael's Mother



Professional Advice: Prepare for the Holidays

Holidays are an exciting time of the year with new decorations, foods, people, and parties. For Autistic children & adults, holidays may bring additional stressors as schedules change, new decorations have appeared, new foods are at the table, and people we don't see often are at the parties. It's important to be prepared for these changes so you can best support your loved one throughout the holiday season.

Before the Holiday: Prepare them for what's coming. Depending on the person, preparation may begin months before or days before the holiday. Consider making a calendar and marking the date of the holiday & all other events they will be attending. Create a social story that details where the event will take place, who will be there, food that will be served, etc. Create a schedule that can be used the day of the event & talk about this schedule beforehand. Prepare family & friends as well. Make sure they are aware of sensory preferences, how your child communicates, etc.

- **Holiday Decorations:** Be aware of their sensory preferences when choosing decorations. This may mean avoiding bright or flashing lights, limiting the number of decorations, etc. If possible, let them help choose decorations & put them up around the house. Consider adding new decorations slowly & talking about the decorations before they are put up.
- **Holiday Foods:** Make a plan with them before the meal. Participate in regulating sensory activities before the meal. Give them the option of moving their plate or leaving the table when they are finished. Make sure there is something they will eat at the meal. Encourage everyone to put some of that item on the plate. In turn, encourage your child to put some new foods on their plate (with no pressure to eat them.)
- **Holiday Vocabulary:** We use vocabulary during the holidays that may not be used frequently throughout the year. If they use AAC, make sure holiday vocabulary is accessible on their device. Introduce the new vocabulary to them using pictures or objects. Explain what these words mean so they can have meaningful conversations about the holidays with others.

cont.





- Day of the Holiday: It's time to celebrate! The day of the holiday may bring additional stressors. Consider packing a "comfort bag" with them the night before the holiday with all of their preferred items. This will be helpful if they are feeling overwhelmed or overstimulated. Bring their schedule & agree on a time you will leave the holiday event. Having a plan & sticking to this plan will help reduce stress. Lastly, enjoy the holiday with your child! While the preparation may feel like a lot of work, you are helping them learn to enjoy & feel safe during the holidays.

Contributed by: A2 Therapy Works in Ann Arbor, Michigan, a pediatric therapy center offering speech and occupational therapy.



Preparing for a New Year

As we prepare for a new year, we think about what has happened this year and what we can change to make it better. Whether it is changing your eating habits or moving into a new place, the results will make a big impact. However, saying you will do it is a lot easier than actually doing it. First, it is important to plan everything out step by step. Create some small goals that you can keep track of, and then end it with a larger goal. If you are able, find someone else who is perhaps working on the same or similar goals. This way, you can motivate one another to continue with your plan. Be aware of obstacles that might get in your way and have a plan to go forward. Finally, if you are changing your daily routine and this is something you want permanently, repeat the goals and everything you did prior. Old habits are hard to get rid of, and you are the only one who can make this happen. Make this upcoming year the year of change, the year of possibilities!

Drew Shaw, M.A. -- AAOM Employee and Autism Diagnosed





Finding Joy in the Holidays: An Autistic Adult Perspective

Growing up, my parents and I spent every Christmas eve at my grandparent's house. We ate so much good food, including my aunt's homemade cookies, toffee, and other treats she baked for us. Plus, I got to stay up really late. My grandpa, who I considered an old grump, used to joke about hearing Santa Claus on the roof, and he always handed out the presents. It was the one time of year I could count on him not being grumpy from working all day on the farm.



On Christmas morning, we had gifts under the tree, just me, my parents, and my cat. It was a nice break between our big family gatherings. In the afternoon, we celebrated with my mom's side. All my aunts, uncles, and cousins were there. The cousins used to do Secret Santa. We would draw names on Thanksgiving and make up our lists. When I was little, I made my list from the Sears catalog. I remember all the bright shiny toys that I would never have even known I wanted if not for that glorious catalog. When I got older my list consisted primarily of albums from Casey's Top 40. We did Christmas like that every year when I was growing up.

Since I started my autistic adults' meetup group a few years ago, I've learned that the holidays are not as joyous for many autistic adults. For some, it is a time of immense stress and overwhelm. I consider myself privileged to be part of a family that accepts me for who I am, so that I don't have to dread seeing extended family members. For many of my peers, the holidays represent a time where they have to explain themselves to others, explain their shortcomings and failures, or why they haven't lived up to expectations.



Each year, we have a holiday celebration at Full Spectrum Agency for our autistic adults. My hope is that it helps create happy holiday memories for those who can't remember any from their childhood. We also have a holiday recovery session, where we talk to each other about what we enjoyed and what was not so great about the holidays. Every year, there are holiday "horror stories" and every year there are other autistic adults who can relate. We may not be able to make everyone feel comfortable at their own family gatherings, but we can be there for them when they need someone to talk it through with.

That makes us a kind of family. We call it a tribe.

There are many things I'm looking forward to this year - seeing my extended family now that we are vaccinated, driving around to see the holiday lights, decorating cookies and putting up the tree with my mom, and not least of all – celebrating with my autistic tribe.

For those of you who struggle with the overwhelm of the holidays, here are my top tips to get you through. In no particular order...

- Spend a day, or at least a few hours, in solitude before and after big celebrations.
- Know your limits on socializing and honor them. Only you know your boundaries. Don't let others decide them for you.
- Pack a sensory kit with headphones, sunglasses, fidgets, and anything else you might need to help you cope during holiday celebrations.
- COVID specific tips – wear a mask and social distance as much as possible, even if you are fully vaccinated.
- Wear loose fitting clothes (if you aren't already) and leave room for dessert!

Katie Oswald, Autistic Self-Advocate and Adult Autism Advocate, AAoM