

# Anderson Center Consulting & Training

## Holiday Tips for autistic/neurodivergent individuals

### General Tips:

- ✓ Be proactive in helping your child prepare
- ✓ Be a role model; it is acceptable to share your feelings (overwhelm, disappointment) with your child
- ✓ Be selective in scheduling; do not feel the need to accept all invitations/attend all events
- ✓ Develop “books” (photo album) of your child’s current topics of interest; this allows them to converse with others using their “book”

Activity or Custom	Why may this be challenging?	What supports and strategies may be helpful?
Anticipating the holiday	Whether the individual is very excited about the day or a little nervous, some individuals may find waiting for the holiday stressful and may perseverate on when it will happen and/or what will occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share specific information about your plans for the holiday (Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, New Year’s). Where will you celebrate the holiday? Who will be there? What food will be served? Consider using a visual support for the individual to reference (social narrative, written information, photos).</li> <li>• Cross off days on a calendar to show how many remain until your holiday celebration.</li> <li>• To reduce stress, identify a limit of how many questions and conversations about the holiday can occur each day.</li> </ul>
Decorations in the home, neighborhood, and community	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines may cause unease, worry, or stress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk about the holiday in advance. Discuss options for decorating at home.</li> <li>• Engage individual in positive holiday themed activity. Decorate cards or make decorations for family, friends, veterans groups, and/or residents of nursing or shelter facilities.</li> </ul>
Gathering of family and friends at the individual’s home	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines may cause unease, worry, or stress. This can include not having work or school for the holiday/recess, temporary environment changes in the home (i.e., visitors staying in the guest room) and having familiar and less familiar people come to spend the day/evening in the home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make a schedule for the day and let the individual know what to expect (open presents at 8:00am, brunch at 10:30am, get dressed at 12:00pm, drive to Grandma’s house at 2:15pm, open more presents at 3:00pm, eat dinner at 5:30pm).</li> <li>• Provide a script for how the individual may respond when opening a present (“Thank you!”, “Thank you for my present.”)</li> <li>• Identify questions visitors may ask (“What grade are you in now?”, “Are you playing a sport?”) and practice greeting others/having a conversation in advance. Some individuals may not be comfortable greeting guests; allow individuals to socialize if/when they feel comfortable doing so.</li> <li>• Include the individual in the preparation by helping to set the table, make place cards, move chairs.</li> <li>• Schedule breaks from the festivities or encourage the individual to take a break when the environment becomes too noisy or busy.</li> <li>• Have favorite sensory or calming items available.</li> <li>• Remember to praise the individual throughout the day (e.g., “I know having so many people in our house is hard for you. I’m so proud of how you’re managing!” or “Great job talking to Grandma!).</li> </ul>

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<p>Attending a party or holiday event at someone else's home</p>	<p>Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines may cause unease, worry, or stress.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the host if there is a designated place within the home that can be used for the individual to take a break if the environment becomes too noisy or busy.</li> <li>• Have favorite sensory or calming items available.</li> <li>• Bring preferred items and activities and any communication or visual supports typically used at home.</li> <li>• Make a plan for how long you plan to stay. If an individual has great difficulty in less familiar places, plan to arrive closer to the scheduled mealtime and leave at an identified time.</li> <li>• Remember to praise the individual throughout the day (e.g., "You did a great job talking with your cousins! Or "I'm glad you took a quick break. It was so noisy in the living room.").</li> </ul>
<p>Holiday meal</p>	<p>Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines may cause unease, worry, or stress.</p> <p>Some people have sensory sensitivities that cause them to have aversions to certain textures, tastes, smells, sounds which can lead to feelings of anxiousness. (The sounds, smells, tastes, and textures related to cooking, serving, and eating holiday dinner may be overwhelming for the individual).</p> <p>Some individuals have particular or selective diets due to sensory sensitivities, gastrointestinal issues, allergies, or the need for consistency and routine.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If possible, plan the meal for a time similar to when dinner is typically served. If that is not possible, share the change in routine with the individual well in advance of the holiday.</li> <li>• Include in the meal, foods that the individual enjoys or typically eats.</li> <li>• If eating at someone else's home, ask the host what foods they plan to serve. Consider bringing a pre-cooked meal or preferred foods for the individual to eat if they do not enjoy or typically eat the foods being served.</li> <li>• Think about and plan in advance where the individual and guests will be seated. Does the individual have a specific chair or place at the table that they prefer? If so, plan accordingly.</li> <li>• Encourage or empower the individual to take a break from the meal if the environment becomes too noisy or busy.</li> </ul>
<p>Dressing for a special day</p>	<p>Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines may cause unease, worry, or stress.</p> <p>Some people have sensory sensitivities specific to the feel or certain fabrics, labels, or elastic in clothing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honor the individual's sensory preferences with regard to clothing options. If a special holiday photo is to occur, plan a specific outfit for the photo and for the individual to change into the preferred clothing option after the photo is taken.</li> </ul>