

Planning for Celebrations

Getting started

Whatever your religion, the major festivals, Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, Yom Kippur, Chinese New Year, Diwali etc, can be a joyous and exciting time – but they're also busy and stressful for everyone – you're not alone.

Changes in routine, unfamiliar objects appearing everywhere and potential sensory overload from all the new sights, sounds and smells, often make it a very difficult time for autistic children and their families. Here are some tips that might help.

General Preparation

The best way to reduce celebration-related stress is to prepare autistic children as much as possible for what will be happening.

- Start talking to your child about the festival and what this means in your family before preparations start. For traditional Australian celebrations, when decorations first start appearing in the shops or when the school starts activities, are good times.
- Make a visual calendar/timetable. Mark dates of any important events such as buying decorations or decorating your home, making food and visitors coming to stay. Also mark when school holidays and any other changes to normal activities eg. after school activities finish, school concerts.
- Add onto the calendar details of the return to normal, eg. removal of decorations, visitors leaving, return to school etc.

- Mark off events on the calendar as they happen. Some children might prefer a “washing line” approach where events are pegged on and taken off when they're over.
- For some children, seeing photos or pictures of what things look like during the festival can help, such as from catalogues or magazines. Include pictures of what food might be eaten. These pictures could be attached to the calendar or kept in a separate photo album or scrapbook. Be careful if your child is very literal as they might expect your festival to look exactly like the pictures!
- Before and after photos of your celebrations from previous years may help children know what to expect.
- It's important to continue with at least some parts of the child's normal routine, such as usual wake up and bedtime routines etc.
- Social scripts are a great strategy for teaching children what's expected of them during celebrations. For example, a story with pictures about “What happens on 'Festival' Day” or “What to do when someone gives you a present.”

Sensory Issues

For some autistic children, the sensory overload at festival times can be very difficult. There

are extra noises, sights and smells. If this is too much for your child, try to avoid taking them to places like shopping centres around Christmas time. It can help to allow your child some extra “chill out” time to wind down each day. If your child is sensitive to smells, you might have to avoid getting decorations with strong smells.

Decorations

If your child doesn't cope well with changes to the home environment, take decorating slowly.

- Show your child where the decorations are kept so they get used to these items before they are brought out.
- Involve your child in decorating, even if they are just in the room while it's being done.
- If your child doesn't like change, keep their room a decoration-free-zone where they can escape from all the activity.

A Christmas tree is a large decoration: you may need to introduce it in stages: first put it up, wait a few days, add some decorations etc. Your child may like to choose a special decoration.

Prior Practise

Practise the things your child might find difficult at various events, eg. sitting at the table.

- Practise waiting. This is often the hardest thing for all children at celebrations!
- Practise eating the food that might be served at the celebration in advance or if this will be too hard, take some food your child likes.

On the Special Day(s)

If you think your child will struggle with a long day, arrive late and/or leave early. It's better to spend a short, happy time celebrating than ending the day with tantrums and tears.

- Advise friends and relatives about your child's preferences regarding hugging and kissing. Is it best avoided? Should it be done on your child's terms? Do they like cuddles?



- If you are going out for the day, discuss with your hosts having access to a quiet area where your child can “chill out” if it gets too much.
- Think about how you will react if any negative comments are made about your child's behaviour at an event. You might want to smile and let it pass, or you might like to discuss autism with the person. Getting angry will spoil your day. It's important that you take some time to enjoy yourself too.

Presents

Teach children a simple, polite way to respond when receiving presents, for example, Say ‘thank-you’.

Many autistic children don't like surprises, so it might be best to tell the child what their presents will be, where they'll be and how they'll be wrapped. Or you could put a photo or catalogue picture of the present on the gift tag. Another idea is to wrap the present in cellophane.

Large numbers of presents can be overwhelming for autistic children. If you think this will be the case, set a limit on presents, for example, one from each person, or suggest that people group together to buy a few more expensive presents.

This information sheet was produced using advice from the lived experience of families and autistic people from the Amaze community.

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