

# Christmas can be a challenging time for some children

Christmas is a magical time of year, particularly for children. The build-up and anticipation is often just as thrilling for them as opening their presents on Christmas morning. You only have to look at the Hill West calendar to see how busy and exciting the run-up to Christmas can be but for some children, including those with a diagnosis of autism, it can be a time of anxiety and confusion.

Changes that many people embrace as part of the fun of the festive season are happening everywhere: decorations being put up, visitors arriving at unexpected times, changes to the school day, loud music playing, busy shops and places to visit. For someone with attachment difficulties or autism, this can be overwhelming and lead to a sensory overload. By Christmas Day, anxiety levels can be so high that even the slightest thing can cause a meltdown. For children with attachment difficulties, for children who have experienced early trauma or for children who have autism, even the smallest of changes can change their world.

What can you do to help your child?

Preparation and careful planning is key to helping children cope at Christmas. Making a schedule and sticking to it can be a challenge at this time of year but it is worth trying to keep a familiar routine going and incorporating a Christmas activity they enjoy into their day, such as switching on the Christmas lights or opening their advent calendar. Adding some Christmas-free time into their schedule can also be a good way to reduce anxiety and stress. Having a Christmas-free, calm place at home means they can spend time relaxing with a favourite activity at moments that may be stressful.

Use a visual timetable or calendar to prepare them for events or visitors and look at Christmas pictures together to talk about what it means to your family. You may also need to prepare them for specific visitors or different people (e.g. people in fancy dress or Father Christmas).



Lots of presents can be very overwhelming. Children with additional needs can find it very frustrating to see piles of wrapped presents under the tree or around the house without being allowed to see what's inside (even if the present isn't for them) so it may be a good idea to keep them hidden away until nearer the time. Choose wrapping paper carefully, or let your child choose it with you. Consider giving the presents gradually throughout the day or week or even limiting the number of presents they receive so they're not overloaded on Christmas morning. Talk to relatives and friends about suitable gifts; many Autistic children have a special interest or sensory needs and would love to receive a box of buttons or roll of bubble wrap rather than the latest toy!

Stay in regular contact with your child's class teacher so we can reinforce all the great work you are doing at home. If there are anxieties around particular events or changes to routine, please let us know so we can work together to support your child. For children who have experienced early trauma, Christmas can be particularly challenging. It brings back memories of times that weren't happy and full of festive fun and frivolity. Even if the child doesn't have explicit memories it can trigger feelings and anxieties linked to the unconscious memories of the past.

**Did you know?**

There are around 700,000 people on the Autistic spectrum in the UK and according to national charity Ambitious About Autism, 100,000 (around 1 in 100) children are affected.

## Christmas Parties and Events

A visit to the panto or cinema can be a fun way to spend time together during the holidays. Did you know that many cinemas and theatres hold regular autism-friendly showings with relaxed performances and soft lighting? Email [autismfilms@dimensions-uk.org](mailto:autismfilms@dimensions-uk.org) or visit [www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk](http://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk) for more details.

### **Find what works for you and your family**

Remember that every child is different. Coping strategies for one child may not work for another and you may have to try dozens of techniques before finding the best one for your child.

### **It's just another day**

Many people feel pressure to conform to expectations or fit in with certain plans over Christmas, which can result in sensory overload for your child and a difficult time for you. Don't be disappointed if your child doesn't react in the way you expected when they open their presents. Do the presents need to be wrapped if the wrapping paper is an issue? Does it matter if you can't have the traditional turkey because your child doesn't like the smell? Will it bother anyone if there's no lights on the tree because they sparkle too brightly? It's just another day of the year, after all! Prepare family and friends for your child and what needs to happen if they have a meltdown.

### **Look after yourself**

Remember that some days will be better than others. Make the most of support if and when it is offered, even if it's just an hour for you to visit the hairdressers or relax in the bath. If you are cooking Christmas dinner, do as much as you can the day before and consider buying ready prepped vegetables to cut down on your workload. Be kind to yourself and remember, you are doing a great job!



### Get there early

**Arriving at a party before the noise can help to calm anxiety and allows the music and chatter to build up around them.**

### Find a calm place

**It's good to find a quiet room or calm space in case your child needs some quiet time.**

### Be aware of loud noises

**The sudden noise of a balloon popping, squealing or cheering children and loud music can all be extremely uncomfortable (and sometimes painful!) for a child with Autism. Ear defenders can help with this if your child is particularly sensitive to sound (and ear muffs work quite well too and fit in with the winter season).**

### Preparation

**Party games and present-giving may need to be discussed in advance of the event. Talking about the rules of party games and how to deal with winning/losing, as well as reminding them who the presents are for and why is a good idea if you think your child may struggle. Social stories are a good way to prepare your child for tricky social situations.**

### Eating and drinking

**Some children may struggle with new or unfamiliar foods. Checking in advance what's on the menu, or even taking your own food/special cutlery items can help. If your child finds it difficult to eat with others, consider giving them a job to do whilst people are eating.**



**“If there is any message it's that it's okay to be different, that it's good to be different, that we should question ourselves before we pass judgement on someone who looks different, behaves differently, talks differently, is a different colour”.**

**Johnny Depp**