



Cool Yule

The very things that many neurotypical people enjoy about the festive season (and similar celebrations) are the things that some people with autism find difficult – the change to the normal routine, the surprises, the unexpected guests and so on. We asked readers for their tried-and-tested ideas for someone who wants to make the holiday season work for her son with autism, as well as everyone else in the family.

1 Look at the world of Christmas through your son's eyes. 'What aspects of Christmas would he enjoy?' Incorporate one of these into his daily schedule, billed perhaps as 'his daily Christmas activity', something perhaps that your other children could either observe or do alongside him.

2 Which aspects of Christmas would overload him and which might be avoided? Could some take place in your bedroom – eg. could the Christmas tree be put in a bedroom? If your other children have separate bedrooms from your son, they could perhaps decorate their bedrooms and make them the Christmas zones in your house, rather than communal areas, such as the living room. This will greatly reduce any sensory overload and anxiety about the changes in your house for your son.

3 Organise a Christmas-free zone in the house, such as a utility room or even the playroom, so that your son has somewhere he can go to that hasn't changed. And give him time to do this on his schedule each day. This can be helpful for you to observe his level of anxiety and make any adaptations you need to preparations for the rest of the day.



4 Receiving presents can be overwhelming and confusing for people on the spectrum. One idea would be to introduce 'toy time' on your son's daily schedule and put out a new toy next to a favourite toy. This way your son isn't overloaded with new toys all in one go. Consider leaving them unwrapped, unless your son specifically likes the sensation of unwrapping presents. Try giving your son one new toy a day instead of giving your son all his presents at once. You could introduce a time/activity symbol on his schedule each day where he can play with a new toy.

5 Use advent calendars to help you get through the Christmas period. The advent calendar could help your child be aware of upcoming events and prepare him for daily changes. You could have a photo of a trip you are going to make and show him how many days (or, as some people say, sleeps) until you will be visiting this place. It can be used to show 'home days' and 'school days' to prepare for the end-of-term.

6 Give your son quiet time with a favourite activity at key Christmas moments for your other children, such as when the others are opening their presents. Could your son play on the computer or watch a favourite DVD in a Christmas-free zone at these times?

7 Utilise friends and family at key Christmas moments. When your other children want to write Christmas letters, practise for their Christmas plays or decorate the tree, ask a friend to watch your child undertaking a favourite activity eg. playing on the computer. Or you might want to watch your son while grandparents or friends undertake these Christmas activities with your other children.

8 Liaise with school. Ask your child's teacher what he/she does with regards to preparing your child for Christmas changes. Try to incorporate the same strategies and symbols at home. By trying to keep them the same, your son may be less anxious. If you use different symbols and strategies, he may think school Christmas and home Christmas are two different things and become doubly-overloaded!

9 Christmas Day – whatever Christmas period changes you have introduced, don't change them on Christmas Day. Keep his schedule the same as far as possible. It is important to think about Christmas changes as early as possible and then try to prepare your child for these. You could have six pictures of his bed and then a photo of the relative who is coming to stay – six sleeps and then Nana comes, for example. Each day you could remove or cross through one of the pictures of the bed.

10 Father Christmas! Sometimes the sight of a man dressed as Father Christmas can make children on the autism spectrum scream and run in the opposite direction. If you are taking your child to a Christmas event, it may be wise to prepare him for the fact he might see a man dressed in a red suit by showing him a photo of a man dressed in a Santa suit."

With special thanks to readers **Rachael Cooper** and **Kathy Burton**.

Further information

For more advice, call the NAS Autism Helpline (NAS Autism Helpline on 0845 070 4004 (Monday-Friday, 10am-4pm) or email autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

- The NAS information sheets, *Christmas and autism spectrum disorders* and *Obsession, repetitive behaviours and routines* are both available from the NAS Autism Helpline or from www.autism.org.uk

Next issue:

We've just received a diagnosis of autism for my older son, who is six. As his father, it has really thrown me and I feel a whole range of things, not all very positive. Are there any other dads out there who could give me some advice on how to cope with this new development?

We would like to hear of advice/strategies from readers on the above question to run alongside NAS advice in our next issue. Please email your suggestions and comments to communication@nas.org.uk with the words 'Readers' advice' in the subject line or write to **The Editor, Communication, NAS, 393 City Road, London EC1V 1NG**. Please include your name and full postal address, even if you don't want them published. We can't publish all contributions and we reserve the right to edit.

The NAS says:

"These readers have pretty much covered everything we'd say. We might add that, when putting up decorations, it is important to involve the person, even if they don't want to put them up themselves. Doing it within eye-shot, or making them aware in another way that it is happening, is important. Returning home to find a tree in the middle of the room can be a bit of a shock! Also, if your child is becoming obsessive about Christmas, you might try to set boundaries around the obsession. Our information sheet, *Obsession, repetitive behaviours and routines*, may help."