

Christmas tips for professionals

Christmas can be an exciting and fun time for many of us, but new activity can be overwhelming for some. However, with good planning and communication, Christmas can be enjoyed by all. With your help, we have compiled a list of tips for the festive period.

This information has been compiled for anyone working with autistic children, adults and their families. The advice is generic in nature and should always be tailored for the individual. **Key to preparing for a successful Christmas is to make sure the autistic person is central to all planning.**



Preparing

*“Preparation is key, leave nothing to chance and run through any hiccup from the previous year. We have learned that if we do all this, the day will run smoothly.” -
A parent*

An autistic person can find any kind of [change](#) difficult. Planning and preparation is key to everyone enjoying Christmas. You could:

- Plan and talk about Christmas as early as possible. Make sure the person you support gets to explore what is important to them about Christmas and that this is communicated to others, such as family or other colleagues that will support them at Christmas.
- Try to keep things the same as much as possible, keeping things as consistent as possible.
- Make sure all planning around Christmas is communicated using the persons preferred communication, i.e. visual, written, spoken, assisted etc...
- Where appropriate use a calendar or [visual timetable](#) to prepare for Christmas. For example, this might be to highlight school days and home days, countdown to Christmas day or when the person may be leaving school or a service to go to the family home.
- Where appropriate you may want to make a booklet about Christmas celebrating and planning what is important to the person i.e. with pictures of Christmas trees, decorations and Christmas food etc...

- If the person you support will be going to a family home for Christmas make sure you liaise with the family to ensure they use the same [strategies, approaches and visual supports](#) as at home.
- Think about and plan around sensory issues that could cause distress, consider ear defenders etc... for key points of potential sensory overload.
- Plan and discuss food in advance:
 - Prepare the autistic person for any changes to meals, cutlery or table set ups, or avoid making these changes all together.
 - Try to keep food and meal times the same where appropriate.
- Don't just plan for Christmas day, plan for the whole festive break



Schedules

"I find Christmas rather overwhelming, the build-up causing much stress and all. I find it helps keeping the routine as normal/usual as possible." - Autistic Adult

Many autistic people have a strong need for routine. You could:

- Whatever setting you work in, try to keep the daily schedule the same for as long as is possible, including on Christmas Day.
- Introduce Christmas activities into the daily schedule where suitable, e.g. Christmas shopping, opening the advent calendar, putting up decorations or switching on the tree lights.
- Plan in any additional visits from family or friends in advance.
- Create a quiet space where the autistic person can take a break if they get overwhelmed, preferably in a Christmas-free area, and particularly around the main days of Christmas or at key times that there may be stress.



Decorations

Many autistic people will have differing [sensory](#) needs, decorations for some are great whereas others will struggle.

"Last year we put the tree up a week before and gradually added decorations as and when he wanted to."

A parent

You could:

- Plan together the amount and most suitable decorations for your service, school or workplace. This could involve shopping for decorations, designing the look, handling the decorations, or helping to put them up.
- Consider decorating gradually, e.g. you could put the Christmas tree in position, decorate it the next day, then put up other decorations even later.
- When decorating services, schools or workplaces try to avoid overloading communal areas, these could be overstimulating for some. Leave some areas decoration free - always speak to those autistic people you support on their preference.



Presents

“Last year my son chose his own main present, and checked it was right when it arrived, then it was wrapped. He felt better knowing his present was right, and it wouldn’t be a surprise, so started the day calm.” - A parent

Presents can be overwhelming on a number of levels, from the wrapping to the amount and expectation on responding.

Always through discussion with the person you support and where appropriate, you could:

- If too many presents are overwhelming, discuss and plan together on a limit. Make sure you share this preference with the family of the person.
- Introduce presents one by one, instead of all at once, or stagger them throughout the festive period.
- Discuss whether presents should be wrapped or not and consider alternatives, for example leave unwrapped but in a gift bag or try wrapping in cling film for less of a sensory overload.
- If appropriate support the person to plan and save for presents to buy for family and friends or alternatively think about more creative gifts i.e. arts and crafts.
- Plan in Christmas shopping, think about going at quieter times or shopping online.



Getting support

- Liaise with family and friends to ensure smooth planning, transitions and support.

Get ideas from other professionals, and share your tips with them, in our professional's community, [Network Autism](#).

Further support from our charity

- [Gift ideas](#)
- [Preparing for change](#)
- [Routines](#)
- [Preparing for Christmas: autism resources](#)
- [Visual supports](#)
- [Communication](#)
- [Anxiety in autistic adults](#)
- [Organising, sequencing and prioritising](#)
- [Obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routines](#)
- [Preparing for change](#)
- [Managing money](#)

Useful resources

- [I know what to expect at Christmas & birthdays](#)
- [3 tips for an autism friendly Christmas](#)