

Christmas tips for grandparents and other family members

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 grandparents and other family members of autistic people. The tips are intended to provide general guidance and will not be suitable for everyone. Key to preparing for a successful Christmas is to make sure the autistic person is central to all planning.

“Don’t try to shoehorn in a “traditional Christmas” - it’s better for the whole family in the long run to work out what a good Christmas for your family looks like.”



Preparing

Autistic people can find any kind of [change](#) difficult. Planning and preparation is key to everyone enjoying Christmas.

- Some autistic people may prefer to have things [communicated](#) in different ways, including the use of [visual supports](#). Talk with the person, parents or carers so you can try to understand what they may prefer.
- Some autistic people will find Christmas activities overwhelming, including [sensory difficulties](#) - talk with the person, parents or carers as to what these might be so you are aware of them.
- Think creatively about how you can bring the magic of Christmas in a way that works for everyone.

“It can be helpful to wear earplugs when attending family or Christmas parties or social events.”

Autistic person

“If you or your child enjoy the Christmas lights and window displays, sit on the top deck of the bus and you’ll get a birds’ eye view without getting stuck in the crowds. We do it every year and involve all my children so everybody’s happy.” - Parent

- If the person does get overwhelmed find out in advance what is the best way to help.
- Your family member may need to know what is happening and when - make sure you share your plans with them or their parents/carers well in advance.
- Routine and structure may be important to some autistic people, this may mean certain things have to remain the same, such as meal times or the types of food they choose to eat. Be flexible and understanding.

“Do whatever works for you and yours. If it is pizza or chicken nuggets for Christmas lunch, that is OK. Don’t strive for the perfect Christmas of the ads or movies, aim for whatever makes the perfect Christmas for your family” - Parent

- If you would like to do certain activities with your relative over Christmas, a meal out, shopping trip etc... check with the person, parents or carer as to how suitable it is and when is best to do it.
- Some autistic people may not want to get involved in social gatherings at Christmas and/or they might want to be on their own. It is important that your expectations of Christmas take account of the needs of the autistic person. Think about the best way for you all to communicate over the Christmas period if you are not meeting in person - maybe a phone call, text or a Christmas card.



Decorations

Many autistic people will have differing **sensory** needs, decorations for some are great whereas others will struggle.

If your relative is coming to visit you over Christmas consider:

- Creating Christmas-free areas of the home without decorations where they can relax away from the potential sensory overload of decorations.
- Liaising with the person, parents or carer as to any adaptations you could make whilst they visit, for example switching the Christmas lights off.

“Christmas is and always will be overwhelming. But being able to have your say is really important. For example: Christmas scents and candles can be super overwhelming sensory-wise so could be avoided when decorating. Flashing fairy lights can be overwhelming visually, etc” - Autistic person



Presents

Presents can be overwhelming; from the wrapping, the amount and expectation on responding to receiving presents.

Where appropriate, you could:

- Discuss with the person, parents or carer whether a limit on presents may be appropriate. For example, one from grandparents, and other family members give money.
- Introduce presents one by one instead of all at once, or stagger them throughout the festive period.

"Andy needs to know his present(s) in advance - he hates surprises, and also struggles with wanting more than one thing at a time." - parent

- 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.



Getting support

Chat with family and friends to ensure smooth planning across the Christmas period and identify any potential help they can offer.

- Get ideas from other families, and share your tips with them, in our [online Community](#).

Further help 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](#)

Useful resources

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