

Christmas tips for parents and carers

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 parents and carers of autistic people. These 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.**

"I tell him at least once a month that Christmas is coming and remind him on a weekly basis."



Preparing

Autistic people 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. Explore what they are looking forward to and what might be a concern for them. Where possible and appropriate, share this with the rest of your family and friends.

"It can be a stressful time. We involve each child to help plan it so each know what's going to happen and we have a laid-back approach that works around them."

- Think about using [visual supports](#) to help explain plans for Christmas, i.e. from lists through to social stories.

"Social stories for anything that tends to be a trigger. We do a practice run for the big day."

- Where appropriate use a calendar to prepare for Christmas. For example, to highlight school days and home days or countdown to Christmas.
- Liaise with school, college or support teams so the same approach and strategies are used at home, and so that Christmas preparation is started at the same time.

"Our 21-year-old son is in residential care but has regular home visits. He comes home Christmas Eve and we have a lovely time by ensuring we follow his routine."

- Think about and plan around [sensory issues](#) that could cause distress - consider ear defenders etc... for key points of potential sensory overload.

"It can be helpful to wear earplugs when attending family or Christmas parties."

- Plan and discuss food in advance and where possible:
 - Prepare the autistic person for any changes to meals, cutlery or table set ups, or avoid making these changes all together.
 - Keep food and meal times the same.

"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."

- Think about how many people will be visiting and when, always communicate this in advance and think about spreading it out over the festive period to make it more manageable.

"Normally it's a quiet affair. Just the immediate family (2 brothers and parents) and I'm warned in advance if anyone turns up during the day. Growing up Christmas was fun and an exciting time."

- Don't just plan for Christmas day, plan for the whole festive break.



Schedules

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

- Keep the daily schedule the same as far as possible, including on Christmas Day.
- Spend Christmas day at home to avoid visiting less familiar family or friends homes.
- Where appropriate introduce Christmas activities into the daily schedule, e.g. Christmas shopping, opening the advent calendar, putting up decorations or switching on the tree lights.
- Have a quiet space (bedroom, spare room etc...) for your loved one to go to when 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.

"Give permission to your teen to retreat to their room if all the family and friends' visits become overwhelming."



Decorations

Many autistic people will have differing **sensory** needs - decorations for some are great whereas others will struggle. You could:

- Plan together the most suitable decorations and how many, this could involve shopping for decorations, designing the look, handling the decorations, or helping to put them up.

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

- 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.
- Create Christmas-free areas of the home without decorations.



Presents

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

- In the build up to Christmas with children think carefully about how you introduce the notion of Father Christmas, explaining it in a way they will understand and avoid the concept of 'Father Christmas having a good and naughty list' - this can cause unnecessary stress if taken literally.

"Our Christmas was revolutionised when I learned that every year he had spent weeks worrying he would be on the naughty list and get nothing."

- If too many presents may be overwhelming discuss and set a limit on the number of presents. For example, one from mum and dad, one from grandparents and other family members could perhaps give money. Make sure you liaise with family on the person's preference too.

"Xmas day, my son's presents are waiting for him when he's ready. I only ever stick to what is on his list. Family give vouchers/cash."

- Some autistic people don't like the surprise of presents they aren't expecting, think about planning in advance and making a list of presents they want.

"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."

"I learned early on that it's best to stick to Santa's list. No surprises as they can often cause anxiety."

- Introduce presents one by one instead of all at once, or spread over 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.

"My eight-year-old son doesn't like Christmas at all. What I found helped him enjoy his presents last year was leaving the presents unwrapped in a plain gift bag. He enjoyed that better as he hates surprises."

- Where appropriate plan and help the person in saving for/buying presents for family and friends.
- Plan Christmas shopping, think about going at quieter times or shopping online.



Getting support

- Liaise 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](#)
- [Managing money](#)

Useful resources

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