



READi Lab Tip Sheet: Preparing for the Holidays December 2017



While the holiday season can be a wonderful time for family gatherings and celebration, it can also provide challenges for children with autism who have difficulty adapting to changes in their daily routines and navigating new social situations. Below are some tips for helping your family make the most out of the season!

Make holiday events as predictable as possible.

- Before the holidays, use a calendar to illustrate events that will occur on different days (e.g., drive to grandma's house, go shopping at the mall, visit with cousins). Make sure to include some activities that your child enjoys each day. Review the calendar in advance with your child as the holidays approach.
- Create a picture book that you can review with your child before (and during) the holidays. Include photos of the family members you will spend time with, as well as pictures of event locations and holiday decorations.
- Try to prepare and taste some holiday foods ahead of time with your child.
- Practice unwrapping gifts with your child so he or she can become familiar with the steps involved (including saying "Thank you!").

Plan your child's day-to-day holiday schedule in advance.

- Even though holiday activities are likely to interrupt your child's regular routine, try to stick to his or her usual schedule (e.g., mealtimes, bedtime) as closely as possible.
- Create a visual schedule describing the activities that will take place each day (e.g., get dressed, bake cookies, eat a turkey dinner) so that your child knows what to expect. Make sure that the schedule includes some preferred activities and "down time." Prepare your child in advance if deviations from the schedule will occur.
- Help your child engage in challenging activities by using a "first/then" board to let him or her know that a preferred activity will follow the completion of the challenging one (e.g., "FIRST shopping, THEN ice cream").

Prepare your child, family members, and friends with helpful tools for social gatherings.

- Help your family and friends know what to expect by sharing information about what your child enjoys and what makes him or her feel anxious. Provide suggestions for what to do if a challenging behavior occurs, as well as how to reinforce good behavior. If other children will be present, you can read them a story such as "My Friend with Autism" by Beverly Bishop.
- When visiting others, make sure your child brings along his or her preferred toys and comfort items, and has access to them throughout the visit.
- Rehearse coping strategies with your child to help him or her manage anxiety or overstimulation. For instance, practice using a choice board that illustrates calming activities (e.g., "take a walk" or "read a story") so that your child has a way to indicate his or her needs. Try to find a quiet place at each event where your child can cool down if needed. Give him or her short "breaks" from activities that seem challenging.
- Practice group games or activities with your child ahead of time, and try to incorporate them during family gatherings to help your child engage with others. For example, put recipients' photos on gifts and give your child the job of being the "gift giver."
- Take photos of your child during holiday activities and make a picture book. The book can be used by your child to share his or her holiday experiences with others, and by you to prepare him or her for next year!

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