

Top Tips for Christmas at home

Christmas is supposed to be ‘the most wonderful time of the year’, but for a lot of young people with autism it can be stressful, uncomfortable or so over-exciting that it is overwhelming. Here are our top tips, for a successful Christmas!

Prepare your young person for what to expect

Changes in routine can cause a lot of anxiety for children with Autism ASD, and there are an awful lot of these around Christmas time. We might go to visit relatives and family friends, or they come to see us. We might go to Christmas markets, or Christmas lights displays. We might go to the panto, or even just watch different things on television. Depending on the age, personality and skills levels of your child, there are different ways to prepare them...



Calendars: Advent Calendars are a great way to count down to the day itself, but we can also use them (or a separate calendar) to note some of the special things going on, either in words or by adding symbols like those below. If you have visitors, or you are going to visit a friend or relation, pop a photograph of them on your calendar.



Timelines For some children, the specific dates are not important, just the order that things are going to happen, so a timeline can be the best way to show them what is going to happen. They may also need to be able to see events past Christmas, to when things go back to normal again in January



Symbols for calendars and timelines can be downloaded here:
<https://www.freeoutreach.org.uk/Christmas-Resources-2023>

'What is special today' board

For other children, it is overwhelming to have all of the information at once. It can work best just to have a place they look each morning, like a space on the front of the fridge, or a 'what is special today?' board to show what changes are happening today.

Social Stories

For children who like to know all of the details, it can work well to write out all of the changes that will happen over Christmas like a story. This could be printed out they can refer back to, or recorded with voice notes or a similar sound recording app on an electronic device, so your child can go back and check it again as many times as they like.

Places change too!

Difference in appearance of familiar places

can be a shock to the system. We know that young people with autism tend to be rigid thinkers, so it can be really challenging when their safe spaces suddenly look very different.

They may not be good at remembering that this happened last year too! When all of your decorations are going up, try to prepare your child how the house may look different. If you

have any photos of the decorations from the previous year, have a look at these together and talk about what was different. Alternately, involve them in the decorating process and give them some choices about where things go. It would be a good idea to have a space available which has no decorations, perhaps their bedroom, so your child has somewhere to go to get away from it all and have things feel 'normal'



Places outside of home

Some children struggle when familiar places in the community start to change too. Shops have special displays and houses start to look different, with Christmas lights up. It may help to go for a walk around and have a look, so it doesn't come as a surprise.

Sensory



Christmas is sparkly. Christmas is noisy. Christmas can be chaotic, and cold, but then warm at the same time. There's glitter everywhere and sometimes people show up wearing bright colours and funky Christmas jumpers. Christmas can smell unusual, like pine trees, candles and artificial snow. For a child with autism and sensory differences, this can be unbearable. If you are already aware that your young person has sensory

processing difficulties, make an action plan to help them cope with all of the additional sensory input. Some ideas include;








- Take the 'banger' out of crackers at home – unpredictable loud noises are tough!
- Avoid scented candles and things that make your whole house smell different
- Set the 'Christmas tree lights to 'always on' rather than flashing
- Give options over clothing and practice wearing the Christmas jumper in advance, to check if it is itchy!

The big day itself!

Schedule the fun! You may love a relaxed Christmas day, or a boisterous one with lots of spontaneous fun, but what your child really wants is to know is what the plan is. Consider using a schedule to let them know the plan for the day, or a now/next approach if your child prefers getting information in smaller chunks. Some children benefit from having choices built in, so you could leave some parts of the day blank and give your child a small number of options to choose from.

A planner template can be downloaded here:

<https://www.freeoutreach.org.uk/Christmas-Resources-2023>

 Christmas Day	
	
	
	
	
	
	

Consider if your child likes surprises Some young people can struggle with the wait to find out if they have got the presents they wanted and may not like the surprise of the unknown packages under the tree. It may feel like spoiling the fun, but some children really prefer seeing the gifts before they are wrapped, or having a photo or word on the tag to tell them what is inside.

Going with the flow

Be prepared to be flexible

Christmas can be stressful at the best of times, with a big lunch to cook, more people in the house and a lot of pressure to make it all 'perfect'. Sometimes our young people just won't be able to do what we had planned, so try to have some appropriate options available as back up plans, and prioritise which battles you're willing to stand your ground on. How essential is it that they eat turkey for Christmas dinner? Do they need to be a part of the Christmas carol concert? Do they need to wear the funky Christmas jumper?



Energy accounting

If Christmas is more stressful for your young person, you may need to plan the time to get a balance between things that they find calming and things that drain their tolerance or emotional energy. For instance, they may need to have an hour of calming activities like mindfulness colouring before that visitor arrives, or some time alone in their room after Christmas dinner. This isn't being anti-social – it's making sure that they will have the energy to be sociable later on.

Don't take it personally if things don't go to plan

Despite our best efforts, wobbles can still occur at Christmas. Don't take it to heart, try and let it go, and focus on keeping your relationship with your child positive. Sometimes it helps to take a step back and think about who we are doing this for? Are we just doing this, because we feel it is what we are 'supposed to do' at Christmas? If it's not going to work for your child, or your family, don't worry about it. None of the Christmas activities in the world are worth risking child or adult wellbeing over. If things go wrong, take it as a learning opportunity for next time and move on.



Prepare for the aftermath

Christmas will be over. For some children this can't come quickly enough, but for others it can feel like falling off of a cliff after a month of build-up. Just like preparing your child for the changes that Christmas brings, prepare them for the fact it will go back to normal again. Mark on the calendar or timeline when the Christmas decorations will be packed away and countdown to when they will return to school. We can all suffer from the January blues, so this might be a good time to start talking about the positive things that will be happening over the next few months.

Have fun!

Christmas can be stressful, but it's also meant to be a lot of fun. Try to go with the flow and enjoy all of the little quirks that having a child with autism can bring!

Updated in November 2023. The above advice is based on our experiences at Freemantles of working with children who have autism and related difficulties.