

HOLIDAY HELP

Do you think of Holidays as a time when the house is filled with the hustle and bustle of lots of friends and relatives, gift wrapping and exchanging, long meals filled with traditional foods? Those same events and images that fill you with Hallmark nostalgia may be problematic for a sensory sensitive child, as well as for young children stressed by the change in routine and the unfamiliar sights, sounds, foods, and people.

The message your children send you may be communicated with significant behavior changes, but what they really mean to tell you is: "I'm overwhelmed", "You changed my schedule", "Why did you put a tree in our living room?", "There are too many people stuffed into this room", and "I am on complete sensory overload".

Here are some tips that will make your holiday time go more smoothly:

Let your kids get involved in planning holiday activities. There are so many fine motor activities before the holidays that your child may enjoy.

- Glue styrofoam balls (available at any crafts store) together to make a snowman, then use it for a placeholder, centerpiece, mantle or window decoration. Glue sequins, buttons or other decorations (even stickers) on dreidles or Jewish Star decorations or Xmas trees (cut from green construction paper) for cards or decor.**
- Create your own special wrapping paper by wrapping gifts in brown paper, then using sponges and washable paint to sponge-paint decorate.**
- Cooking together is a great sensory experience, so let your child help measure, mix and decorate holiday cookies, or peel potatoes for latkes (but watch those little fingers if they help grate).**

Give children a role in the holiday event. Some kids do well if given a "job" to do at a gathering. Perhaps you could assign them to take coats from guests to an out of the way room, or to be the greeter (be the first to arrive and assimilate guests more slowly - often a better choice for some), or card distributor. Having a helping role may give them a feeling of security as they have a clear sense of what to do in a chaotic environment.

Minimize the element of surprise:

---Get a large calendar and mark off the days till Grandma or Santa arrives, till the first Chanukah candle is lit, till you leave on a holiday trip.

---Tell your child what will happen at each holiday event before it occurs: who will be there? what will they have to wear? what foods will be served? what is the plan for the day?

---If the holiday celebration is similar to one your family has had before, show pictures of the previous event to remind them of "who" and "what".

---If your child might need a break from activity overload, work out with them a place in your home or where you will be going where they can retreat if they feel overwhelmed, and tell Grandpa ahead of time that it's ok if Johnny doesn't partake with all the other cousins.

---If you'll be traveling on a plane or going skiing as a family for the first time, don't forget to look to You Tube for videos for making it a more understandable experience for your child.

Be prepared if you travel: Travel at this time of year, whether by car, plane or train, often comes with delays.

---Remember to take a soft comfort item (stuffed animal, small pillow, or blanket) for your child.

---Let them carry a small backpack with that favorite lovey, as well as juice boxes, multiple snacks (put the healthy ones in their backpack, keep the "junk" food rewards in your possession for doling out for extra great behavior), favorite book, paper and crayons, stickers, playing cards.

---Have a few small new gift items that you can hand out as needed ([local toy stores](#) are great at recommending things for this reason).

---Favorite music on an iPod with headphones can go a long way towards calming and entertaining a restless or stressed child.

Keep your child moving when possible: Take a walk after a big holiday meal. Do jumping jacks together in the parking lot at a rest stop. Jump in the leaves and stomp in the snow.

Don't stress about holiday clothing: It's not worth forcing your child to wear a holiday outfit that will make them uncomfortable. Being flexible (and bringing a change of clothes) will reduce your anxiety as well as theirs. But perhaps they'll like dressing up. You'll only know if you try it out - but do it ahead of time, so you can cut out any scratchy tags and remove uncomfortable bows. Wearing a suit without socks or with sneakers is ok, too - just think of it as a fashion statement!

Everyone makes fun of fruitcake: Don't make your child eat something they find yucky, even if it's Great-Aunt Jane's pride and joy. Your child will survive the season, even if their holiday dinner is mac and cheese or chicken nuggets. And if they can't handle (or are allergic to) the abundance of sweets found at many holiday gatherings, make sure you bring acceptable alternatives along.