

Preparing for the Holidays

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The holiday season can be overwhelming for children with sensory processing challenges, but with preparation, you can help your child manage sensory overload and enjoy the festivities. Here are some strategies to guide you through Christmas gatherings, travel, present-opening, and calming techniques.

1. Strategies for Being in Large Groups

- Prepare with a Visual Schedule:
 - Use a visual schedule to prepare your child for Christmas day. Include activities such as greeting family, eating, present-opening, and taking breaks. Review this schedule before the day to reduce anxiety and help them anticipate transitions.
- Teach Social Phrases and Cues:
 - Practice key phrases like "hello," "thank you," or "more" in simple sentences or signs. Use social stories or role-playing to help your child understand how to greet people, wait for their turn, or ask for help during gatherings.
- Create a Quiet Space:
 - Set up a sensory retreat area where your child can take breaks from the noise and crowds. Include familiar objects like a weighted blanket, noise-canceling headphones, or favorite toys. Let your child know they can take breaks whenever they need to.
- Introduce Group Settings Gradually:
 - If your child has difficulty with large groups, introduce them to the environment slowly. Arriving early or visiting in smaller groups beforehand can help them become familiar with the setting. Allow for breaks during the gathering.

2. Strategies for Traveling to Different Locations

- Prepare for New Sensory Experiences:
 - Practice the sensory experiences that may come with traveling, such as different smells, sounds, or crowded spaces. Pack sensory-friendly items like chewable necklaces, fidget toys, or noise-canceling headphones to help regulate input during travel.
- Bring Familiar Items:
 - Traveling to a new place can feel overwhelming. Bring along familiar sensory-friendly items such as a favorite stuffed animal, blanket, or preferred snacks. These can provide comfort and grounding in unfamiliar environments.

- Plan for Communication:
 - If your child struggles with verbal communication, bring along a PECS chart or communication device so they can express needs like "bathroom," "break," or "snack." Familiarize family members with your child's communication style to support them better.

3. Strategies for Opening Presents

- Limit the Number of Presents at Once:
 - If present-opening feels overwhelming, consider spacing out gift exchanges. Your child can open a few presents at a time to avoid feeling overstimulated. Allow breaks between each gift if needed.
- Practice Present Opening:
 - Practice the act of opening presents ahead of time. Use small wrapped boxes to introduce your child to the idea of unwrapping without the added pressure of Christmas Day. Help them prepare for surprises or unexpected gifts.
- Teach Simple Responses:
 - Teach simple phrases like "thank you" for when they receive gifts. If verbal communication is difficult, encourage them to sign or gesture. Role-play present-opening with family to practice responding to surprises.

4. Calming Strategies When Overstimulated or Excited

- Use Deep Pressure Techniques:
 - If your child becomes overstimulated, try deep pressure strategies like a firm hug or a weighted lap pad to help them calm down. Deep pressure can be very calming.
- Sensory Calming Breaks:
 - Incorporate calming activities like swinging, bouncing on a therapy ball, or gentle rocking in a quiet area. These activities help regulate sensory input and reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed.
- Breathing Exercises:
 - Teach your child simple breathing techniques, such as "smell the flower, blow the candle." This can help them manage excitement or frustration in the moment. Model these exercises during calm moments so they're familiar with the technique.
- Noise-Canceling Headphones or Earplugs:
 - If your child is sensitive to loud sounds, such as laughter or loud music during gatherings, provide noise-canceling headphones or earplugs to reduce overstimulation.

5. Other Helpful Tips

- Control Lighting and Sounds:
 - If Christmas lights or loud music are overwhelming, create a calming space with dim lighting and soft music or sounds. You can also bring a favorite blanket or toy with soft textures to help ground your child during overstimulating activities.

- Movement Breaks:
 - Build in movement breaks, such as running, jumping, or stretching, throughout the day. These breaks help release energy and regulate the body's sensory system, allowing your child to rejoin the festivities with more focus.
- Predictable Transitions:
 - Clearly communicate when transitions are coming, such as "In five minutes, we're going to eat" or "After presents, we'll play." Predictable transitions reduce anxiety and give your child time to prepare for changes in activity.

Christmas is filled with sensory experiences, and it's important to prepare your child. Through thoughtful planning, social stories, visual schedules, and calming strategies, your child can have a more enjoyable and manageable holiday season. Be sure to prepare in advance, communicate with family members, and make sure your child knows it's okay to take breaks whenever they need them.