

The holidays are supposed to be a time of relaxation, long summer days spent at the beach and family filled fun festivities. However, for an individual on the autism spectrum the holiday season can be a time of sensory overload, disrupted routines and anxiety.

Here are Aspect's Top 10 Tips to create a more autism-friendly holiday season.

Top Ten autism-friendly holiday tips

1. Structure during the silly season

For someone on the autism spectrum schedules and routines bring much needed consistency and predictability and can reduce anxiety. A calendar can provide a useful visual guide to help manage the disruptions to routine that the holiday season can bring! For kids on the autism spectrum, try to keep to the daily schedule, such as bed and meal times.



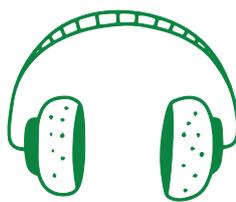
and abilities, this can also help provide structure for an event. Or, if you or your child/ren have trouble socialising at parties, find out in advance who will be in attending and plan some questions to ask people ahead of time.

2. Stick to the plan, but have a plan B

Once you've agreed on a schedule, stick to the plan, even if that means leaving an event before it wraps up. But remember that no matter how well you plan, chances are something may not go as expected. Be prepared to be flexible and make a plan B in advance. For example, you may wish to leave an event or party early - communicate this to the host in advance, so you slip out the backdoor without having to say goodbye or upset anyone.

3. Provide a sensory-friendly experience

Sometimes an Autistic person may get overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and smells in our surroundings. During the holidays, high traffic areas, such as churches, shopping districts and parties can be mentally draining and cause sensory overload. Look for reduced sensory opportunities, such as online church services and purchasing presents online, or seek retailers that offer more supportive experiences, such as sensitive Santa or quiet hours.



6. Decorate Differently

For an Autistic individual coloured twinkly lights, Jingle Bells blaring and crackers popping can create anxiety. Choose decorations that are less stimulating, such as lights that don't flash and crackers that don't pop! And keep the tinsel to a minimum!

7. Presents - assembly required

Presents and toys tightly wrapped in paper or plastic can create frustration for a person on the autism spectrum with high expectations of a gift! Consider not wrapping presents, using gift bags or taking gifts out of the packaging first, so they are easily accessible. This also goes for those big items that need to be put together too, such as bikes and doll houses. And try giving the gifts over time, not all at once to manage help overstimulation.



8. Develop shared expectations and make new traditions

Schedule a family discussion so everyone can discuss their anticipations, worries or wishes for the season. This can help to manage everyone's expectations. Try making your own family traditions, for example, decorate the tree in a theme, such as Minecraft or superheroes.

4. Out and about

If going out, try to identify in advance calm locations to unwind and relax, or take equipment such as sunglasses or headphones to help manage the sensory input. A lot of shopping malls have quiet locations that you can go to and if you are the one hosting a party try providing a quiet place for a person on the autism spectrum to retreat to. For kids, try creating a special holiday box to have on hand when visiting. Fill the box with calming items, including favourite books, music and visuals, and stimming toys.

9. Look after yourself

The holiday season can get hectic. Acknowledge your own feelings and expectations around this time and make sure to schedule some time for yourself. Set expectations that are achievable and realistic, and understand that it's ok to say 'no' to a holiday invitation. Don't be hard on yourself if things don't go as planned.

5. Managing the chit chat

Many people on the autism spectrum find reading social cues and body language challenging. To make the experience more autism friendly, consider including games and puzzles based your guests' interests



10. Aim for an inclusive holiday

At Aspect, we believe that we can all be more inclusive simply by becoming more aware of the different and diverse ways each of us engages with our world, and by making small adjustments that recognise, and are inclusive of those differences. Focus on a person's ability, interests and their unique perspective, so everyone feels welcome. Accept everyone for who they are.



These tips were developed in conjunction with people on the autism spectrum.