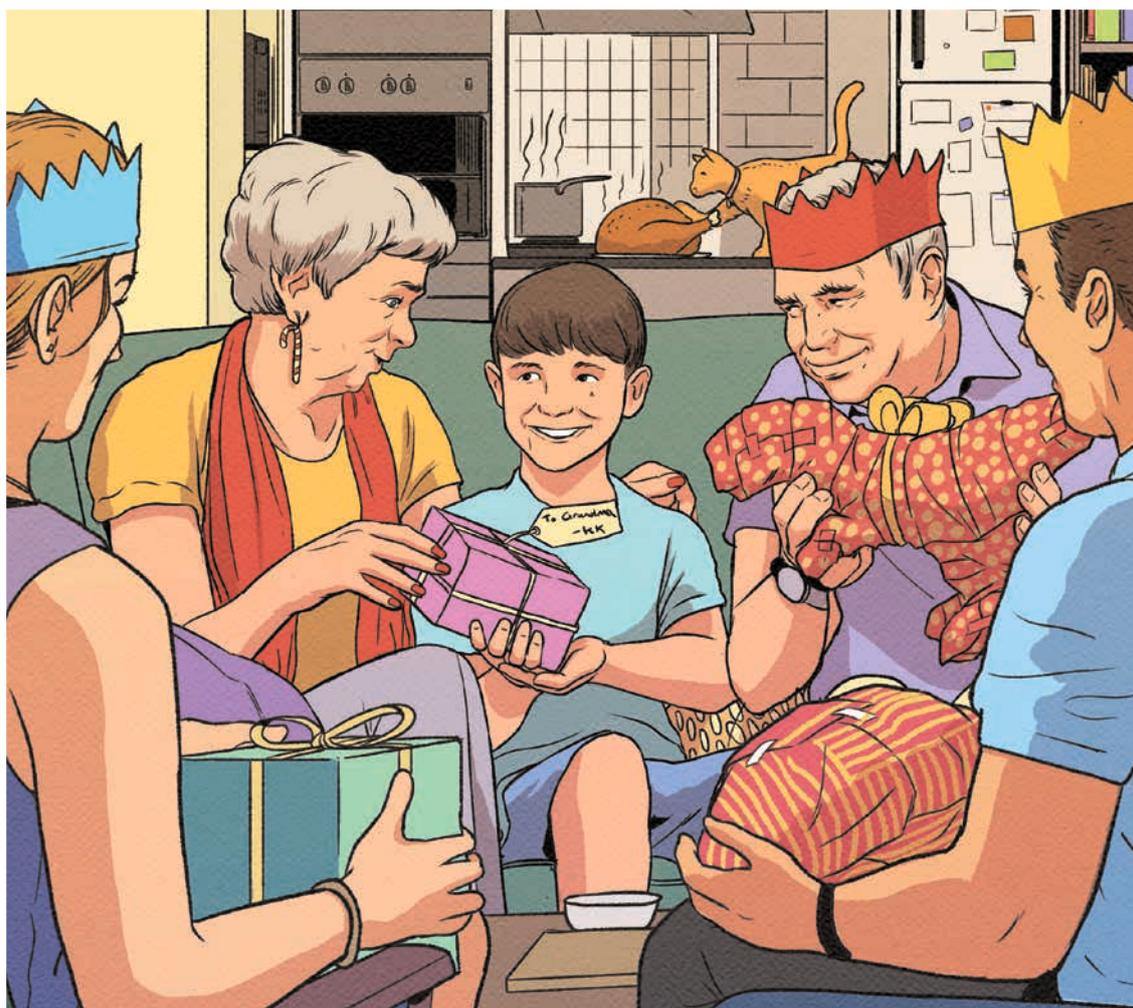


A GUIDE TO SURVIVING THE FESTIVE SEASON

THE CHRISTMAS YOU WANT VS.
THE CHRISTMAS YOU HAVE



BROUGHT TO YOU BY
AUTISM SPECTRUM AUSTRALIA (ASPECT)



TAKING THE "ARRRRGGG GGHHHH" OUT OF CHRISTMAS

In the movies, on TV and in every magazine ever, Christmas is perfect. Immaculate families look gorgeous as they choose thrillingly perfect gifts for one another and sing carols around the piano. And of course, no one ever says or does anything that could possibly cause a hiccup.

Well, that's fiction and this is real life.

Christmas can be a stressful time of year.

Even when you try to keep it simple, there's a lot to cope with: pressure to spend time with extended family, awkward social events you'd rather avoid, chaotic shopping centres, heightened expectations and the constant reminders that your family isn't quite as flawless as the ones on TV.

But it can be fun.

This "survival" guide is designed to identify some of the festive season's stress-points and provide some practical tips so you and your family can navigate your way and make it to New Year in one piece and get the Christmas you want.

HERE TO HELP

While Christmas can be a chaotic time for everyone, for people on the autism spectrum it can be particularly challenging.

Crowded shopping centres, loud Christmas carols, lots of decorations, increased social expectations, family visits and relatives to stay - it can quickly become overwhelming and overstimulating.

An estimated 1 in 70 people in Australia is on the autism spectrum. It is likely that you may know someone on the autism spectrum at work, through friends or maybe even a family member.

Every person's experience is different, but generally Autistic people have trouble with social communication, social interaction and restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests.

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) - Australia's largest service provider for people on the autism spectrum - is here to help. We strive to ensure no-one on the autism spectrum is left behind, including at Christmas time.

The things that make Christmas overwhelming and overstimulating for people on the autism spectrum can affect us all.



BRING ON THE FUN

This fun, practical guide is all about helping you take the stress out of Christmas so you can create the Christmas you want with the people you love.

Inside you'll find handy hints that unwrap the mysteries of giving gifts that are fun to give, and awesome to receive.

We'll give you the low-down on taking the drama out of family gatherings, and share some practical tips on handling Christmas lunch, festive noise and season chaos without succumbing to the usual anxieties that can easily overwhelm us at this time every year.

With a few of our simple strategies in place, you'll find yourself with less stress and more time for the most important Christmas activity of all - having fun.

This year you can finally have the Christmas you want rather than the one you might usually have!

ENJOY THE FESTIVE SEASON!



SURVIVE: GIFT GIVING

In a perfect world, gift-giving is an expression of how well our loved ones understand us, how much they cherish our happiness and know just what we need to make our lives a little bit more fantastic.

Well, this is real life so perfection is a tad difficult to achieve. But here are some ideas on getting and giving gifts that won't disappoint.

NO MORE DUDS! KRIS KRINGLE TO THE RESCUE

This age-old office tradition can work a treat at home. Get your family together and set a Kris Kringle price limit. Before Christmas Day, ask every family member to make a list of five gifts, put them in a bowl and take turns at drawing them out. Don't tell anyone who you got. Select a present from the list and on Christmas Day you'll be guaranteed to give and receive a perfectly appropriate, much-wanted present!

PROJECT CHRISTMAS

Who says it's all about individual gifts? Perhaps you'd like to skip the one-to-one gift-giving and pool your talent and resources as a family for a Christmas project. Maybe it's making something - an awesome new playlist, or that family photo album you've been putting off for years. Or, perhaps it's a household project, like building a cubby house. Project Christmas can be anything you like that's stress-free and fun for the whole gang - and this one doesn't even need wrapping!

MAKE IT ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE

Often we get and give gifts that are not really vital to our lives. How about making this Christmas about others? Get the family together and discuss charity gifts, talk about why helping others is important, then select a charity that best reflects your desire to do good and help people in the world.





THE BEST GIFT

The shops would shut down if we were all the same and we wanted exactly the same thing for Christmas - where's the fun in that!

It's awesome to celebrate our differences and really express ourselves. But one family with a child on the autism spectrum felt they could be judged negatively, simply for getting their son a Christmas gift that would fuel his passion and bring him joy.

"The family had a three-year-old son who was obsessed with cleaning products," explains Vicki, a Clinical Psychologist at Aspect. "He just loved mops and buckets and spray bottles. His parents were really agonising about what to do for Christmas - they knew if they bought him anything other than (safe!) cleaning products it wouldn't be good for him, but they felt weird about giving them as

gifts. They worried, 'What will other people think if we give him a mop?'"

After consulting Vicki and the Aspect team, the family developed the confidence they needed to disregard Christmas gift stereotypes and ignore the judgements of other people. They went ahead and gave their son what he really wanted - a range of cleaning products. **"It was the best gift for them all - their son really enjoyed that Christmas," says Vicki. "He was so happy, which made his parents really happy."**

Aspect truly understands that each person on the autism spectrum is different. Through our wide range of services, we support families like this to navigate - and celebrate - the unique qualities and changing needs of every person on the spectrum so that no one is left behind.

SURVIVE: EXTENDED FAMILY DRAMA

We see our immediate family frequently. We know their wonderful strengths and their less fabulous personality traits - and they know the same about us. For better or worse, we get them and they get us.

But at Christmas time more distant relatives that we don't know so well, come out of the woodwork. These folks can often stress us out with their (silly) ideas, (out-dated) attitudes or (weird) behaviours.

Here are a couple of handy hints for avoiding awkward situations and overwhelming moments with the relo's this Christmas.

TAG AND RELEASE

If you only see your large, extended family only once a year it can be hard to remember everyone's name. To avoid embarrassment, get some family volunteers to make colourful, Christmassy name tags (with photos too!). Distribute them in a fun way at your family gathering and see how relieved your guests (including the older ones) are when they can see everyone's name and pretend to have known it all along!

TAKE A TIME OUT

Sometimes relatives quick-fire questions at you in an attempt to catch up on the last twelve months in 10 minutes. It can be exhausting. If you feel yourself getting stressed, acknowledge it. Say "excuse me" and go somewhere quiet for 10 minutes, calm down and gather your thoughts.

CHIT-CHAT

Take the stress out of dinner table conversation by creating Conversation Cards. To prepare, choose some topics that are inclusive and all the people at the table would be comfortable discussing. Write the topics on cards and place them in the middle of the table. Everyone can pick a card and have an interesting, fun topic to discuss over your meal!





SOOTHING SWINGS

Seven-year-old Charlie who's on the autism spectrum loves Christmas. He gets super-excited about Santa coming, but a lot less excited about the 20 relatives who come to his house for Christmas lunch each year. "With the best of intentions, our family members want to talk with Charlie and find out what's happening," explains Emily, Charlie's mum. "Often when he'd had enough he'd shut down - he'd either run out the door, put his hands over his ears or yell loudly."

These days, Charlie is part of an Aspect class, where he's been working with his teachers to learn skills that help him cope with big family gatherings. His teachers have been using visual aids and social stories that help him

better understand what to expect and what is expected when family members approach him, ask questions and give gifts. The school has also developed a colour coding system that helps Charlie to identify his emotions and self-regulate his feelings.

This has been life-changing for the family. Now, Charlie can recognise when he's starting to feel overwhelmed, then retreat to his backyard swing for a break to soothe himself. Sometimes family members are invited to chat to Charlie one-on-one while he's on his swing, feeling calm and relaxed.

Emily has also learned that she can help Charlie by making the extended family more aware of his needs. **"We remind them of the cues to look for that indicate that Charlie may need some time on the swing or time alone to regulate his emotions,"** says Emily.

SURVIVE: THE SEEMINGLY ENDLESS LUNCH

We all know it's likely to be 35°C on Christmas day AGAIN this year, but hey, that doesn't seem to deter keen cooks from slaving over a hot stove all day to roast up a turkey or honey glaze a ham.

Food is a central part of Christmas day, but preparing and even eating it can cause all kinds of knots in the stomach.

GAME PLAN

When inviting guests, be clear about what time they should arrive and what time the meal will be served. Stick as closely as you can to the schedule, so guests know what's going on and can relax. If you're a guest and you feel anxious about when food will be served, go ahead and ask, it's not impolite.

TIMING IT

To keep things on schedule, ask guests to contribute a dish to the meal. Be specific about what you'd like. On the day, these are dishes you won't have to worry about. For the rest, prepare as much as you can in advance. Try to have only one or two hot dishes to worry about on the day, and have them ready 30-minutes before your stated meal time to give yourself some wiggle-room.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

If you're hosting lunch, repeat the following words: Never make a dish on Christmas day that you have not made a dozen times before. Never.

Sure, Nigella Lawson can concoct anything on a moment's notice, the rest of us need practice. Avoid the stress of trying something new, stick to your faves and make something that works.



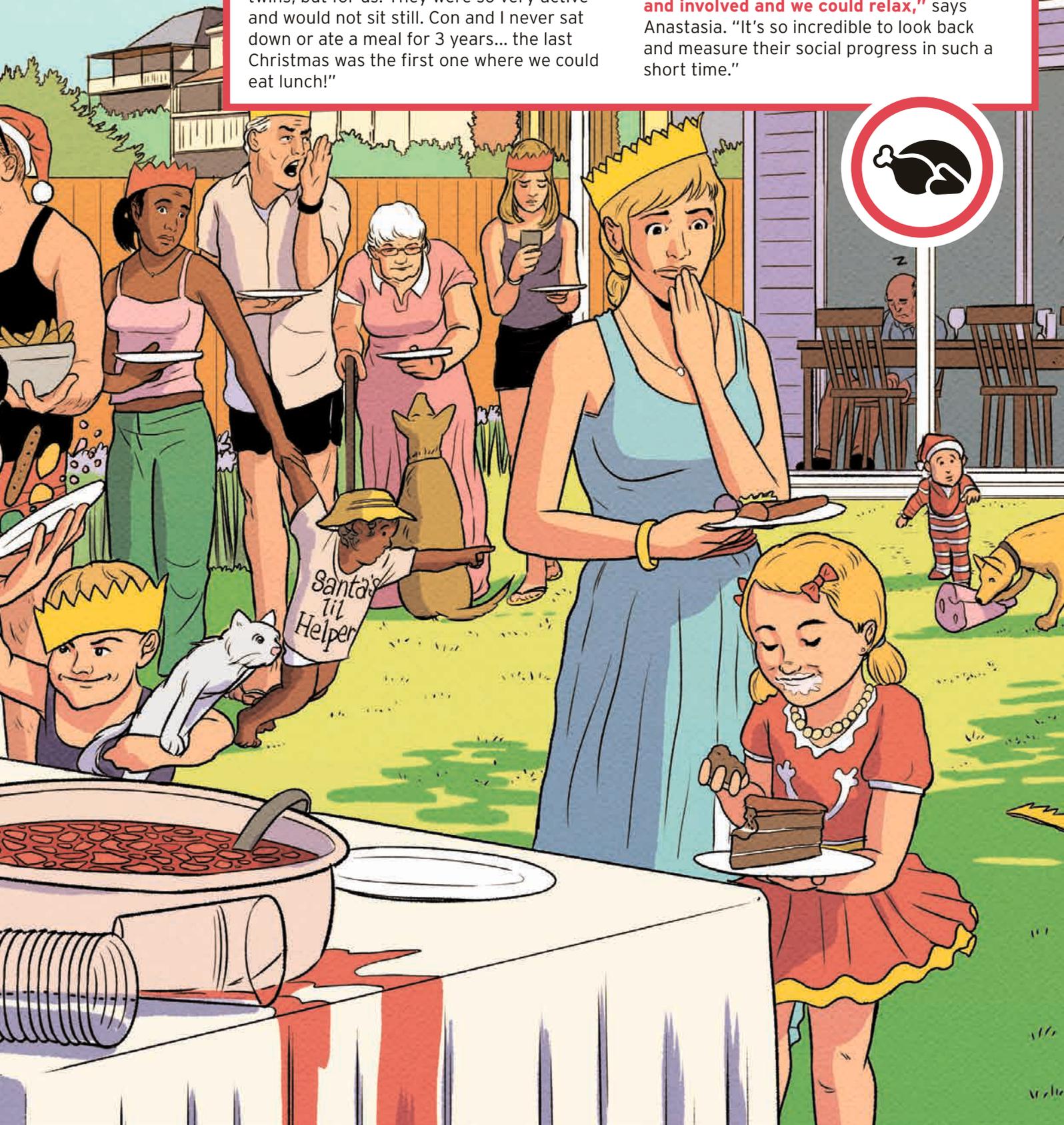
A LUNCH TO REMEMBER

With seven-year-old twins on the autism spectrum, life can be hectic for Anastasia and her husband Con. But last Christmas something amazing happened - they all sat down and ate Christmas lunch - together!

Up until then the twins, Lola and Vassilios, could not remain at the table for a full meal. "Family get togethers were always exhausting," says Anastasia. "Not for the twins, but for us! They were so very active and would not sit still. Con and I never sat down or ate a meal for 3 years... the last Christmas was the first one where we could eat lunch!"

Lola and Vassilios go to one of our Aspect schools, where in a specially tailored learning environment, they've been working with teachers to develop social skills including remaining at the table through mealtime and appropriate table manners. In addition, Anastasia has written social stories that help the twins to understand the behaviours expected at Christmas time.

"I think last Christmas was incredibly special because the kids were so engaged and involved and we could relax," says Anastasia. "It's so incredible to look back and measure their social progress in such a short time."



SURVIVE: NOISY TIMES

'Jingle Bells' following you down the street? Lounge room crammed full of people shouting over one another to be heard? Spruikers with microphones trying to sell you stuff that you don't need?

Move over Michael Buble, that's the real soundtrack of Christmas!

PREPARE FOR THE CRUSH

If there are lots of people coming to your home for Christmas day, diffuse the noise and the energy by setting up a few different areas where they can chat. Set up pairs of chairs to encourage intimate chats; invite people to go out to the garden, balcony, or stoop for a natter. Relax, it's good if not all your guests are in the same place at the same time!

CHILD ALERT

OK, so children can be noisy. The best way to keep a lid on things is to keep them entertained. Playing a board game, charades or watching Home Alone are all good ways to keep the noise down. Then, give everyone warning and alternate the sedate activities with some boisterous outdoor games.

QUIET TIME

It's easy to get overwhelmed with so much going on. Shopping centres can be exhausting. Unfamiliar people at home can wear you out. Thinking up things to say to distant relatives is, frankly, hard work. Give yourself a break. Go to your happy place. Maybe it's your quiet bedroom; or, your child might have a favourite place in the garden. Don't forget to have a breather. Chill out. Head back to the world when you're ready for it.



"The three main areas of difficulty that people on the autism spectrum face during Christmas are intertwined with the sensitive senses that we have. The loud music, the delicious smells from the kitchen, bumping into relatives and having to socialise throughout all this can be difficult. When things get rough for me, I go to a quieter room and spend time having a one-on-one chat with my favourite uncle."

– Thomas, age 26.



SURVIVE: THE CHAOS

Wouldn't it be lovely to sink into a nice comfy chair, enjoy a cold drink and listen to Christmas carollers sing after a pleasant day's shopping?

In real life when the countdown to Christmas begins, the commercial world goes into overdrive. Department stores whip up a frenzy around 'must-have' Christmas gifts, while shopping centres teem with gift-buyers bamboozled by the endless choices. It's crowded, it's noisy... and it's just not perfect!

VIRTUALLY SPEAKING

Don't like the Christmas crowds and noise at your local shopping centre? Go online! In the peace and comfort of your own home (quite possibly in your pyjamas) you can choose gifts that fit your ideas and your budget, without the pressure of salespeople and queues. To fully avoid stress make sure you allow plenty of time for delivery.

GO EARLY

If you are very organised you can start your Christmas shopping in November or even earlier - hey it's no surprise Christmas is coming, you can shop in advance. If you can't get into that, try going early in the morning. Most shops are open for extended trading hours in the lead up to Christmas, try getting there before 10am. It's relatively quiet, and with fewer people around, the decorations feel far less overwhelming.

DIYOW

Do it your own way! Let go of the idea that there is a perfect Christmas. Work out your own style and go with it. It might take a few years to try out some things - see if prawns on the beach works better than potluck at home - you never know until you try! Find your peace. Find your happiness. **Create the Christmas you want with the people you love.**





3 TIPS TO MAKE SURE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND AT CHRISTMAS...

- 1** Provide a positive sensory experience. Think about smells, tastes, sounds, hands-on activities and visual stimuli that are appealing to someone on the autism spectrum. Try Christmas themed glow in the dark ceiling stickers, baking great smelling Christmas cookies or using preferred foods in Christmas themed recipes.
- 2** Create a special Christmas box your child can take with them when visiting family and friends' houses. Fill this box with calming and interesting items including favourite foods, books, music, headphones and visuals. Ensure there's a quiet space where your child can access their Christmas box.
- 3** Use your child's special interests to help them associate Christmas with something really fun. Think about what your child likes and incorporate this into your family's festivities. Perhaps superheroes can wear Santa hats or Christmas trees can be decorated with Minecraft or Pokémon ornaments.

By Joanne Tisdell, Aspect School Principal

ABOUT ASPECT

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) is Australia's largest service provider for people on the autism spectrum.

We believe that no-one on the autism spectrum should be left behind, and our wide range of services - including a specialised schools program that is the largest in the world - strive to deliver the best opportunities for people at home, in the classroom and at work.

We are passionate about people, about being positive and about what's possible. We are single-minded in our pursuit to make life better for people on the autism spectrum and through research we are devoted to making connections that help us to better understand people's needs and wants.

Our vision is to provide the best possible opportunities for people on the autism spectrum.

OUR SERVICES

Autism lasts a lifetime and affects about 1 in 70 Australians, or 350,000 people.

The word 'spectrum' reflects the different challenges that people on the autism spectrum face and that no two autistic people are the same.

Our services provide people on the autism spectrum with the opportunity to realise their unique potential throughout the life stages, from the early years to adulthood. We also provide much needed support to their families, carers, friends and colleagues.

SERVICES WE PROVIDE INCLUDE:

- Information and advice
- Diagnostic assessment
- Early intervention programs
- A network of autism-specific schools and classes
- Educational outreach
- Positive behaviour support
- Parent and family support networks
- Adult programs
- Parent education and professional development workshops
- Employment services and mentoring.

Aspect is a not-for-profit organisation. We rely on the generosity of our donors and supporters to continue to provide essential services within local communities.



If you, or someone you know is on the autism spectrum and need support or advice, please contact us:

**www.autismspectrum.org.au
1800 ASPECT (1800 277 328)**

If you would like to make a donation to support individuals on the autism spectrum, please visit:

www.autismspectrum.org.au/donate

This guide was developed with input from people on the autism spectrum.