



Top Tips for Christmas

The Christmas period can be a very exciting but often stressful time of the year for many autistic people. It can be a time with lots of change, increased expectations around social interactions, and lots of extra sensory information.

Making some simple adaptations and adjustments can help the autistic child or young person to feel more comfortable within the setting or at home, so that they can enjoy Christmas in a way that is meaningful and comfortable for them.

Prepare and warn of changes.

Changes in environments and routines may cause difficulties for an autistic child or young person.

How can you help?

- Using a calendar or visual timetable to prepare for Christmas and for specific events for example, the school Christmas show, the trip, or parties. Share strategies with parents for example, preparing for when Grandparents are coming to stay. Clearly define which will be school days and home days for the holidays.
- Use a social story to prepare the child or young person BEFORE the changes/events take place.
- Talk about Christmas time and what this means for your setting/class/family, and any traditions you will be following and why.
- Make a booklet about Christmas with pictures of Christmas trees, decorations and Christmas food to illustrate changes in the environment. Parents/carers could share photos of last Christmas and practitioners/teachers may have photos of the previous years decorated classroom.
- Liaise with parents and families/educational settings so that the same strategies and visual supports are used as at home and school, and so that Christmas preparation is started at the same time.
- Prepare the child or young person for specific events, e.g. by showing them a symbol or photo of a man dressed as Father Christmas - when doing so remember if the child or young person is literal in their understanding they may



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expect the real thing to be exactly the same as the photo so you may wish to look at several different images or use a symbol.

Schedules and Routines

Many autistic children and young people thrive when within a strong routine. This is especially important in times of change.

How Can you help?

- Keeping your daily routines, the same as far as possible, including on Christmas Day. Have the same getting up and going to bedtimes and meals at the usual times of day.
- Incorporate a Christmas activity that the child enjoys into their daily timetable, for example, opening the advent calendar, or switching on the tree lights.
- Give the child some Christmas-free time on their daily timetable - time on their own in a quieter area of the house to engage in their favourite activities providing a 'social break' from family and friends. Observe the child's anxiety levels and make any adaptations for the rest of the day. A quiet room with a low arousal approach where there are no Christmas decorations could provide a sensory break for the child within the school/nursery day. Ensure the child has opportunities to engage with their preferred/familiar/favourite activities.
- Offer the child quiet time with a favourite activity in a Christmas-free zone at key moments that may be stressful, such as Christmas parties at school or when other people are opening their presents at home. Enable the child to 'opt in' to the activity but provide opportunities for the child to leave the area if they need or would like to. At school/nursery activities and events should be carefully differentiated to enable the child to take part should they want to.

Christmas Decorations

Coming into school or returning home to find a tree with flashing lights could be a bit of a shock.

How can you help?

- Consider a child/young person's sensory likes and dislikes before decorating the classroom or home, for example if a child is sensitive to flashing lights have static ones and ensure there are regular times during the day when the lights are not on.



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- Involve the child or young person in changes to the setting or house, for example, take them shopping for decorations, if appropriate enable them to handle decorations, let them see you hanging the decorations up, consider can they help you to put them up? This pre warns the child of change and actively involves them in making the changes enabling them to feel a sense of control.
- Consider decorating gradually, for example, you could put the Christmas tree in position, decorate it the next day, then put up other decorations even later.
- Keep things that might impact on sensory processing away from communal areas that the child/young person has to access for example, Christmas scents within the school/nursery, hall, and corridors.

Presents

Having a large number of presents could be overwhelming.

How can you help?

- Setting a limit on the number of presents, for example, one from Mum and Dad and one from Grandparents - other family members could perhaps give money which could be used to buy gifts at other times.
- Introduce presents one by one, instead of all at once, this could be spread over the Christmas holiday period and beyond.
- Put out a present next to a favourite item (e.g. a new toy next to a favourite toy). Make sure the child/young person has plenty of opportunities to engage with preferred/familiar toys/activities.
- Consider leaving their presents unwrapped unless they enjoy the process of unwrapping. Young children might be helped to understand 'unwrapping' by watching gifts being unwrapped on you tube; alternatively families/practitioners may record familiar people unwrapping gifts and saying thank you.
- Explain to family members that your child may not initially interact with the toy until they become comfortable with it. Prepare family members who may not understand how your child or young person may react that they may not get the response to gifts that they may expect.
- Give an opportunity for the child to meet Santa at school/nursery if they wish, but do not insist on it. Consider providing their present at a later time when they may feel more comfortable rather than at the Christmas party.



- **Getting support**

Not all family members will understand the differences how and why your child/young person might experience Christmas differently and that that is ok. Explain that your child requires structure, routine, and familiarity to feel relaxed and calm and explain their routine to family and friends. Discuss any sensory differences and adaptations.

- Provide a means for your child to communicate that they may need a break from the festivities and provide a quiet place to retire to. For younger children this may mean sharing behaviours that you would see when the child is becoming anxious or overwhelmed or for older children a 'code word' or phrase may be helpful. For some children/young people, having an 'I need a break' symbol to give to a trusted person can be useful.
- Get support from friends and family, for example, enlist relatives to engage with your child in a favourite activity while you support siblings or deal with other tasks.
- Get ideas from other families, and share your tips with them, at www.autism.org.uk/community
- See and hear things from the perspective of an autistic person and share this perspective with friends/family/colleagues: [An Autistic Friendly Christmas - Autistic Girls Network](#), [An autistic person's guide to an autism-friendly Christmas - Autistic Not Weird](#), [3 tips for an autism-friendly Christmas](#) - Jamie Knight, [Autism and Christmas » NeuroClastic](#) - Emma,
- Further support and guidance can be found at:
 - National Autistic Society: [Preparing for Christmas: autism resources](#)
 - Neurodiversity Hub: [Neurodiversity information hub - MindMate](#)
 - Autism Together: ['How to'... have an autism-friendly Christmas - Autism Together](#)

Example Resources



2024 EY Christmas at nursery social story.docx

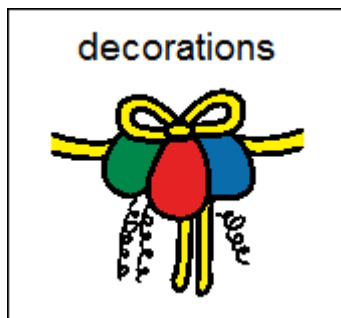
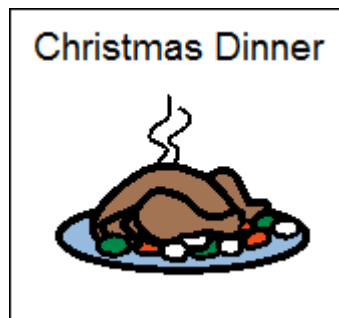
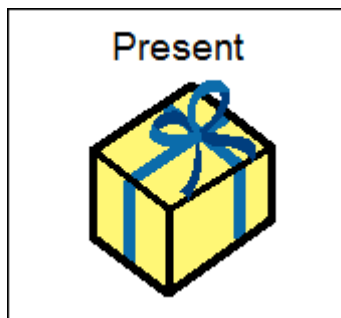


Christmas at school or nursery social story



A Social Story all about Christmas Time

Useful Boardmaker Symbols



Fr. Christmas



Santa's sack



reindeer



no school



school



home



party



decorate tree



Christmas Day



Christmas songs -
Boardmaker.docx

Useful Widgit symbols



Christmas tree



lights



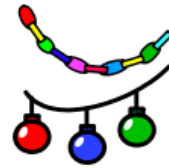
Santa



nativity



party



decorations



Christmas present



christmas dinner



school



school holiday



home



christmas eve

Third Party Disclaimer

In this document we have provided links to external websites. Our ethos is to connect schools and settings with services that can support raising outcomes or provide unique



opportunities for children and young people. This includes links to services provided by third parties where Leeds City Council do not provide that specific service. Third party services are independent of the council and, whilst we will endeavour to act on any feedback we receive, we have no control over the quality of service provided.