



Notes from the December 2008 IATTAP Parent Café Developing a Strong Holiday Plan

Preparation and planning are key components to an enjoyable holiday season for a family with a member on the autism spectrum.

Planning Ahead

- ** Start thinking about which aspects of the holidays are most meaningful or important to you. Focus your energy on preparing your child and the environment for the events and moments you really care about. Be ready to sit out those parts that aren't really important and which your child cannot tolerate.
- ** Decide if it makes more sense for you to host a gathering or for your family to attend a gathering at someone else's house. Hosting others in your own home means a lot of work and planning ahead of time, but it offers the benefits of a familiar surrounding and a place to get away from it all to your child. Attending a public event or going to someone else's home means you will probably spend more time watching your child and running interference, but it also means you can leave when you need to and you don't spend days preparing and cleaning up.
- ** Divide tasks between you and your spouse so that all the preparation and planning doesn't end upon one person.
- ** Walk through the event or gathering in your head from your child's perspective. What do you see, hear, smell, and feel? What is going to stress your child? Bring supports such as headphones, fidgets or weighted objects even if your child seldom uses these things anymore.
- ** As much as possible, dress your child in comfortable clothing. Uncomfortable or unfamiliar clothing may create sensory or toileting problems that only add more stress to an already stressful event.
- ** Preview the event with your child using visuals such as photographs, clip art or drawings. Do this at least a few days in advance so your child has time to think and ask questions.
- ** If you have a family calendar, make sure all holiday events are on the calendar. If you don't typically use a family calendar, make one for your child that shows holiday events and days off school.
- ** Cook and freeze meals ahead of time to make life during the holidays a little less hectic. If your child is on a special diet and/or you will be traveling, this is a great way to make sure you always have the foods you need.
- ** Arrange celebrations or play dates with other families who have children with special needs. Both you and your child need time to decompress and be around people with "get it."

Traveling

- * Bring the most important pieces of home with you. Favorite foods and toys are good choices, but also think about what brings comfort to your child – the pillow and blanket he uses each night? A special plate or bowl to eat from?
- ** Consider traveling at night if you have a child who will sleep in transit.
- ** Notify the airline, ship, train or bus company that you have a child with special needs and what accommodations you may need. Do this ahead of time rather than requesting it when you arrive.
- ** If your pediatrician gives you advice about using medications to relax your child while traveling, try them out beforehand! Many children with autism have unexpected reactions to medications. You may intend to make your child sleepy and end up making him hyper instead!
- ** If traveling by plane, role-play going through security checkpoints at home. Unexpected, illogical requests like removing one's shoes to go through security can be the trigger for a meltdown if this concept has not already been explained to the child.
- ** Help your child focus by making an "ID card" for him. Make it his responsibility to hold the card and show it at security, just like the adults do. This may help him stay focused on the process and become less distracted by all the activity.
- ** A stroller for a younger child or a special needs stroller for an older child can be of great benefit in public places like airports and train stations. Even the most mild mannered child can become overwhelmed in these chaotic and unfamiliar places and unexpectedly bolt.
- ** If you plan to carry medications on a plane or if you are leaving the country, be sure to have a note from your physician that indicates your child's diagnosis and confirms that it is necessary for you to travel with these prescriptions.
- ** Think about the safety measures you take at home and how you will implement those on the road. If your child elopes, how will you make sure he cannot get out of the hotel room or grandpa's house?
- ** Treat traveling like an adventure, because it is! Many kids on the spectrum love traveling by plane, train and even car. The waiting time is likely to be harder than the time in transit. Spend some time reviewing with your child how you will travel, how long it will take and what to expect along the way.
- ** Pack a bag of special treats and toys that only get played with while traveling. You can wrap these up like presents if your child enjoys opening presents.
- ** Make a scrapbook from your own pictures or those you find online to prepare your child for the places you are going and people you will see. Let him review it as often as he likes. Take the book with you on your trip along with a calendar to mark off the days until you return home.
- ** If your child likes maps, get him a map of the route you are taking and help him trace your journey. Look for landmarks along the way and see if you can find the same ones on the way back.

- ** Think creatively to incorporate a special interest into your travel plans. For instance, if you are driving a great distance you might stop at a special point of interest halfway through the trip.

Visiting Other People's Homes

- ** Anytime you attend a social gathering at someone else's home, pack a bag of your child's favorite items so that he will always have something to do (paper, pens, fidgets, books, etc). Know when to bring out the big guns like portable DVD and CD players. The more your child can focus on these things, the less likely he is to be bothered by what is going on around him.
- ** Decide ahead of time how long you are going to stay and stick to it. Better to leave when things are going well than to wait until someone loses control. This is particularly important if you have told your child when you will be leaving. He may not respond well to a delay.
- ** If possible, take two cars so someone can take the child home while allowing the rest of the family to stay. If that's not possible, consider attending the event in shifts.
- ** When going to large social gatherings, arrive early to let your child acclimate to the noise and activity as people arise. This will be an easier transition than walking in to a large, chaotic event.
- ** Never forget to find the bathroom and point it out to your child in a new place or even one he has been to before. Don't make him rely on his memory or ability to ask for directions.
- ** Watch your child for signs of stress and fatigue. Praise him often, point out what he is doing well and let him know you are proud of him. Catch and reward good behavior and make sure your child knows what it is that he is doing right.
- ** Be realistic in your expectations. Make two or three simple rules and review them before and during the event. Too many rules will lead to his forgetting all of them.
- ** Arrange a place where your child can get away from it all. This might be an unused bedroom, a quiet porch or even your car, if necessary. There has to be some place that offers privacy and respite from the sensory stimulation of the event.
- ** Don't expect others to watch your child or take responsibility for him. If someone you trusts volunteers to spend time with your child, then let him.
- ** If your child has a habit of touching or handling things, this is likely to increase in a new and stressful environment. Ask your host to remove breakables from reach. If you meet resistance, you may need to reconsider the visit.

Greetings and Social Interactions

- ** We see people during the holidays whom we may not have seen all year. Don't expect others to know how to interact with your child even if you told them last year. Be proactive in setting the tone. If your child doesn't like hugs, make sure you redirect the interaction before someone tries to give a hug: "Oh look! It's Uncle Fred. Johnny give Uncle Fred a high five!"
- ** Children with autism often have a very difficult time recognizing people, especially those they only see a few times a year. Help children remember family members' names and information by creating a family and friends book. On each page include a photo and one or two facts about the family member or friend. To encourage social interaction, you can leave

lots of room in the book and have your child bring it to holiday gatherings every year. Give him an assignment to add one new fact about each person. You may need to add a list of questions prompts to the book to help your child communicate with others.

- ** Teach your child some social scripts to fall back on. Comments like “Oh my, how you’ve grown!” and “Have you been a good boy for Santa this year?” may leave your child wondering how he is supposed to respond. A few stock phrases will go a long way.
- ** Teach your child a polite and easy way to get out of uncomfortable social situations. Have him practice using an all purpose excuse like “I have to go help mom now.”
- ** Children with autism spectrum disorders can have a hard time during unstructured activities. To add structure or meaning to an event, give your child a role. Give him a camera and a list of attendees and make him the event photographer. Ask him to get at least one picture of everyone in attendance.
- ** If your child likes social interaction but has a hard time initiating or maintaining conversation, assign a job that will require him to have brief, structured encounters with other guests. He may be tasked with relaying drink orders to someone in the kitchen, “checking” on other kids to let their parents know what they are up to, or he may play the part of the town crier, letting people know when dinner is ready or when various activities are starting.

Holiday Meals

- ** Go over seating arrangements in advance, keeping in mind sensory issues such as sensitivity to perfumes or the need to sit at the end of the table so the child isn’t jostled by too many people sitting too close together.
- ** In deciding whether or not to have a kids’ table, remember that sitting at a table without a parent may be extremely stressful for some children. It also means you won’t be around to explain anything to the cousins or other kids who may not understand why your child is eating different foods or is allowed to have an entire meal consisting of jello.
- ** If your child is on a special diet, bring his food or offer to prepare something for the whole group that fits into his diet.
- ** Some families allow for leniency of special diets during the holidays. If you do so, plan ahead so that you know when that will be acceptable and when it won’t be. If you don’t, you may find that the entire season becomes one big exception to the diet.
- ** Have your child eat something before leaving home. He will be more capable of handling the stress if he is not hungry. Many children will become too tense to eat in public even if they are very hungry.
- ** If your child is a picky eater, bring alternative food for him or feed him before leaving home. This is not the time to insist on his trying new foods.
- ** Even with his own food, the smell of other people’s foods may be overwhelming to your child. If your priority is to have everyone eating together at the same table, you might need to use nose plugs to enable the child to remain at the table. If you simply want everyone to be together, it may be better to allow the child to eat his own food before serving the big meal and then have the child participate in some other way such as refilling water glasses which would give him a purpose for being around others but allow him to escape the odors and noise as needed.

- ** If eating at the table or even just eating simply isn't going to work, recognize that and don't set yourself up for disaster. Have the child join the family for a short prayer or ritual and then allow him to go play. A few minutes of success is worth more than an hour of grief.
- ** Help your child make the connection between how he feels and the food he eats. If he is cranky after eating many sweets, help him recognize this. Tying the foods he eats to his feelings and behaviors is a way to help him understand why you may limit the amount of sweets and other foods that are so abundant during the holidays.

Traditions and Rituals

- ** You may need to rethink family traditions or adapt rituals to make them accessible to your child. You will have to balance the value of maintaining a tradition against the value of having your child participate. It might be time to revamp some old traditions into something more in line with your family's abilities and interests or it may be more fun just to start some new traditions!
- ** If you feel isolated because of lack of nearby family or the inability to attend the sort of holiday events you did in the past, make a new "family" consisting of other parents and children who feel dislocated during the holidays.
- ** Traditions and rituals often make little logical sense which can make them difficult for children on the spectrum to understand. Use pictures from past holiday gatherings to review traditions. If you do not have pictures of specific activities, draw pictures or write stories.
- ** Almost any activity can be adapted in a way that will enable children to participate. Engage kids with autism in repetitive and predictable activities such as stringing popcorn for trimming the tree or tossing out wrapping paper after opening presents.
- ** Bring a quiet toy, like a calculator, to religious services or other social activities. A quiet object of concentration, such as a rubber band, pictures, books, or an object of visual focus, can be very helpful, particularly if it has religious significance.
- ** If your child is unable to attend religious services at all, speak to your community about setting up a "cry room" – a room to which parents can take children who need to be active or make noise and which has the audio (or video) of the service piped in.
- ** Holidays are often celebrated with beautiful decorations and lights. These objects may be irresistible to a child with autism. If you have decorations that your child cannot touch, or if you are visiting someplace with many temptations, think about buying your child his own smaller version with which he can play. Battery operated candles with electric "flames" may satisfy a desire to reach out to real candles. Small, fiber optic trees are inexpensive and just as visually fascinating as their larger counter parts. Fisher-Price makes children's versions of nativity sets and KidKraft offers wooden Hanukkah sets including menorah, candles, latkes, coins and dreidel.
- ** Take pictures when you and your child trim the tree, visit relatives, open gifts, etc. Make a book about your holiday by gluing the pictures onto construction paper, writing a short sentence under each picture, and stapling the pages together. When someone asks your child a question regarding the holidays, your child can use the book as a visual cue to help tell about the things he or she did.

Gifts

- ** Ask your child's teachers and therapists for a list of gift ideas to give to relatives.
- ** Don't limit your child's gifts to things he "ought" to want. While giving him opportunities to experience age-appropriate interests and activities is important, make sure that he also gets some of the things he loves even if they are atypical for children his age.
- ** Practice giving and receiving gifts before the actual event. Teach your child a polite phrase to say when he opens a present he doesn't care for. "Surprise" him with presents weeks before the holidays that contain boring household items wrapped in festive paper and ribbon. Make a game out of learning to react with a smile and polite response.
- ** Take toys and other gifts out of the box before wrapping them. It is more fun and less frustrating if a child with autism can open the gift and play with it immediately.
- ** Space out the opening of gifts. Even if everyone else is frantically tearing open presents, don't rush your child. Give him some time to play with each gift before requiring that he open the next one. If not all gifts get opened, just pack them up to go home while wondrously proclaiming about what a great job Grandma did of finding a present that captivated her grandson for so long that he wasn't able to tear himself away.

Preparing this year for next year

- ** Take photos this year of events and people your child is likely to see again during future holidays. Take pictures of special holiday foods, activities and religious rituals so that you can talk about them over the coming year.
- ** Make note of anything your child shows interest in. In future years, these interests can be turned into opportunities for more participation in family holidays.
- ** Set a goal for next year and work on it through the coming year. Choose one skill or activity that you would like your child to do next year that you can teach in the coming year. This might be something like saying "thank you" for gifts, signing his name to cards, or remembering the cousins names.
- ** If you would like your child to eat (or at least taste) special holiday foods, start at the new year for the next holiday season. Children need a lot of time and many chances to experience new food before they will eat it. Unless you serve cranberry sauce regularly at your table, there is little chance that your child will try it the one day a year that the rest of the family eats it.
- ** Before you put your decorations away this year, take photos of what they look like all set up. Then put the pictures on the storage boxes when you take everything down. Next year your child can help you find the decorations and put them up by referring to the pictures.

