



Your Guide to Preventing Sensory Overwhelm:

**Help Your Child Enjoy the
Holidays without
Overstimulation**

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The holiday season during the last part of the year is a time of celebration and fun for most children. Whether your family celebrates Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, New Year's and other holidays, most children love the activities and anticipation of gifts and fun times. Yet, it is also a time of bright lights, noise and a lot of excitement and anticipation. That can be overwhelming for any child, but it can especially bring sensory overload to children with autism and ADHD.

So how can you prevent or reduce the risk of sensory overload this time so you and your child can enjoy the holidays? As a parent/caregiver, you can follow many steps to help your child.



1. Make a plan

You know your child best. Therefore, you know what holiday activities may trigger a sensory overload and lead to a meltdown. Take some time to think about the events and activities coming up and how your child may react. Then, make a plan to reduce the risk of sensory overwhelm. For instance, if you know that a particular holiday party has too many people and too much noise, either decide to skip it or map out a spot in the venue that is quieter. You can plan to take headphones for your child and a special toy that will calm them.

2. Designate a safe place

If you are attending a holiday event, figure out a quiet and safe place at the venue to escape to if your child is becoming overwhelmed. If you are attending a musical at a theater, then find a quiet place in the lobby to go to if the music, lights and other sound become too much for your child. That way, you can go out for a break when needed.

3. Consider morning activities or the best timing for your child

Morning may be the time when your child is fresh and hasn't been challenged much yet that day. Therefore, scheduling holiday activities in the morning may be a good choice for you and your child. However, if your child is not a morning person, then schedule activities at whatever time your child tends to be most motivated and alert.

4. Ask a favorite relative of your child's for help

Going to a family gathering? Ask your child's favorite relative – maybe a grandma, aunt or uncle – to help with keeping an eye on your child and watching for signs of distress. Let them what the plan is for sensory overload and where the safe place is. They can be great allies and help you prevent a meltdown.

5. Role play scenarios that may occur

Helping children prepare for potential scenarios can go a long way in preventing sensory overload. For instance, have them practice waiting for their turn to open presents, unwrapping them and saying thank you. For a big dinner, role play asking for a dish to be passed to them.

6. Create picture books so your child knows what to expect

When your child is young, they may not remember details from one holiday season to the next. A picture book that includes photos from years past can help prepare them and keep them from being overwhelmed. For example, include photos of your home décor, activities at your place of worship and relatives who your child usually only sees during the holidays.

7. Keep similar routines as much as possible

Our schedule tends to fill up during the holidays. Yet, as much as possible, try to keep as many routines in place as possible for your child. For example, if a holiday party means a late dinner, then feed your child at their normal time

before you leave. They can have a smaller meal or snack at the party.

8. Use headphones, fidget toys and weighted vests when needed

Be sure to use the tools your child needs to stay calm. If loud noise or crowds bother your child, ensure they have their headphones. If you are having to sit through a play or worship service, bring some fidget toys. If they are bothered by the stress, have them wear a weighted vest to reduce their anxiety.



9. Go into another room if a particular tradition or activity will upset your child

If there is a particular activity or tradition that will upset your child or cause stress, take your child elsewhere. For instance, if loud singing bothers your child, enjoy the reduced sound of it from another part of the house.

10. Avoid crowded places (try to do holiday activities like visiting Santa when there are not as many people)

If you are going to an event or activity that could have a crowd and long lines, call the venue to see when the least crowded times are for it. Explain your situation, and the event organizer most likely will be happy to advise you on

when a good time is for you to bring your child and family.

11. Look for low sensory versions of events

Many movie theaters offer low sensory times for families with children who have autism and other special needs to enjoy holiday and other movies. You can search on Google to find those times or ask your local autism support group.

12. Use Social Stories™ to talk about upcoming activities

Using social stories for the holidays can be so helpful to talk about and prepare your autistic child for the upcoming activities. Try this free [Christmas social story](#) and this one about [visiting relatives and getting dressed for winter](#).



13. Include your child in the home decorating process and limit the number of decorations to what your child can handle

Too many decorations at once may cause some distress in your child. Gradually decorating your home may be more acceptable to your child. Make it a fun activity each day and include your child in the process. Maybe you choose three items to add each day for a week. Or you decorate a Christmas tree by

putting up the tree one day, adding the lights the next day and then finally adding ornaments and garland the third day.

14. Use a visual schedule for days that include holiday activities

Using a [visual schedule](#) on days when there are holiday activities can help your child know what to expect. They may be more adaptive when they understand how their routine may change.

15. Ask your child to choose a code word to say to you when they are starting to feel overwhelmed

When your child is feeling overwhelmed, they may have difficulty communicating. Therefore, have your child choose a single code word – or even a non-verbal gesture – to give you when they are starting to feel sensory overload. That will help you take steps to remove them from the situation and help them to calm down before a meltdown occurs.

16. Before going to a holiday event, gather the family for a meeting to set expectations

If you are going to a holiday event, make sure the whole family knows what to expect. Discuss what time you will arrive, the planned time for leaving, the activity itself and what to do if anyone gets separated. This will help set expectations and help everyone in the family feel more prepared.

17. Make your child's sleep schedule a priority

When your child sleeps well, then they feel better. Therefore, during the holiday season, ensure your child is getting enough sleep. Make their bedtime and

wake-up times a priority during the season.

18. Bring extra, soft clothing with you to a party or event

Holiday clothing can be stiff, itchy and uncomfortable because of the fabrics and adornments used for them. When you go to a holiday event, party or family gathering, bring some extra comfortable clothes for your child to change into if their holiday clothes bother them too much.

19. Bring food for your child, especially if they are on any special diet

If your child is a picky eater or is on a special diet, be sure to bring a food that your child likes to a party or gathering. That way, they are guaranteed to have something they will eat.

20. If dining out, ask the host/hostess for a quieter corner table

Crowded restaurants can be loud with lots of distracting activities. Ask the host or hostess if your family could sit at a quieter table. Also, arriving early in the dining time may give you more options of where to sit, and it won't be as crowded.

21. Go shopping when it's not as busy

To avoid the hustle and bustle of the mall or other store while shopping, try to avoid the busiest times when too many other people are doing their shopping. Call the store (or mall office) and ask for the days and times when it's less crowded.



22. Ask teachers to offer more quiet opportunities to your child in class leading up to the holiday break

Your child's teacher can be an ally in helping to avoid sensory overload. Many times, the holiday season means additional special activities at school. Ask your teacher to offer your child quieter opportunities when possible. For instance, during reading time, maybe your child could go to a quiet corner of the classroom to do their reading.

23. Have a meltdown kit with you

When you go on a holiday outing, bring some items that will help you calm your child in case of a meltdown. Your meltdown kit can include a favorite toy (like a small plush or other small item), weighted vest, sunglasses, headphones and anything else that will help with too much sensory input.

24. Don't worry about your child stimming

Many times, people with autism stim to help calm themselves. If your child is stimming more often during the holidays, don't worry about it. They are doing it to de-stress and keep from being overwhelmed.

25. Encourage them to watch a favorite show or listen to favorite music

Encouraging your child to watch a favorite show or listen to favorite music can help them better enjoy the holidays and keep them calm.

26. Avoid holiday clothing that is too scratchy or has too many ruffles or lace

Holiday clothes can be made of uncomfortable fabrics or have too many adornments. Carefully select your child's clothes for special events and try to find more comfortable options for them.

27. Create family traditions that your child will look forward to each year

Kids with autism thrive on routine. Create family traditions for the holidays that you can repeat year to year. This will help your child and your whole family have something fun to look forward to each holiday season.



28. If you have visitors from out of town, do not make your child's room a guest room; they need their safe place and normal routine for sleep

To avoid sensory overload and meltdowns, protect your child's safe place in your home. If you have visitors coming to stay with you, avoid making your child's room a guest room. Ensure

they are able to keep their routines for bedtime. If your child sleeps well, they can better handle the stresses of the holiday activities.

29. Identify tasks for your child to manage

Having control of something can help your child de-stress. Let your child help with the holiday activities by giving them a task or two to manage themselves.

30. Provide a list of gifts to relatives that your child will like and accept

Relatives who want to give your child a gift may not know what to give them. It's a good idea to provide a wish list for your child of gifts you know they will enjoy and be happy to receive.

31. If flying by plane, visit the airport before the trip if your child has never flown before

Many local autism groups in major cities offer special airport programs for people with autism who have never flown on an airplane before. Contact them to see if there is a program available. They usually include giving your child an opportunity to see the airport, go through security, board a plane and more so that your child will be ready the day of their first flight.

32. If taking a road trip, travel in the evening/night

If you are travelling by car for a few hours, consider making the bulk of it in the evening or nighttime (unless it would require travel all night). Your child may end up sleeping through much of the drive.

33. Prepare your relatives for a visit with reminders about your child

Send an email or make calls before the family gathering to provide some reminders about your child to relatives they may not have seen for a while. For example, if your child does not like to be hugged, suggest a high five or a big smile and welcome instead. If your child is very sensitive to noise, remind them of that sensitivity.



34. Spread out holiday activities over the weeks leading up to the holiday

Avoid sensory overwhelm for your child by spreading out holiday activities over the weeks leading up to the holiday. The great thing about it being a “season” is that you don’t have to pack everything into a single week or a few days.

Following these tips can help prevent sensory overload for your child and help you and your whole family have a fun holiday season!