



Preparing for Christmas An Autistic friendly guide

Christmas can be challenging for autistic individuals due to differing perceptions of fun. We highlight the importance of understanding and accommodating neurodivergent needs, whilst recognising that traditional Christmas celebrations may not align with everyone's preferences. Where possible, we must encourage flexibility and acceptance of diverse Christmas experiences, ensuring that the focus should be on creating a comfortable and enjoyable holiday for neurodivergent families.

Why can Christmas be difficult for autistic people?

Western society often portrays Christmas as an idyllic time of year, filled with joy, family gatherings, and extravagant gift-giving. However, this idealized image is a relatively recent phenomenon, and many cultures celebrate Christmas differently. For neurodivergent individuals, these societal expectations can feel inauthentic and stressful.

Christmas often brings **significant changes**, which can be particularly challenging for autistic people, especially children and young people. The uncertainty surrounding new routines, activities, and social demands can lead to increased anxiety. From school performances and holiday music to altered shopping experiences and gift-giving pressures, the festive season can be overwhelming for neurodivergent individuals.

Christmas presents can be a source of uncertainty for many people, especially those on the autism spectrum. The anticipation of the unknown, coupled with the social pressure to express gratitude, can be overwhelming. For neurodivergent individuals, the surprise element of gift-giving may not be as enjoyable as it is for others. If your child prefers to **choose their own gifts**, consider honouring their preference. The surprise factor is often more beneficial to the gift-giver than the recipient. Additionally, avoid putting your child in situations where they feel pressured to unwrap presents in front of a crowd. For some individuals, this can be a highly uncomfortable experience. To alleviate stress, consider unwrapping gifts privately or using minimal wrapping with visible clues about the contents. These strategies can make the gift-giving experience more positive and less anxiety inducing.

The way families celebrate Christmas varies greatly, and traditions can often involve large gatherings with extended family members. However, these gatherings may not always be accommodating to the needs of neurodivergent individuals. If extended family members lack understanding of your family's unique requirements, it's important to prioritise your child's well-being. While educating others about neurodiversity can be beneficial, don't hesitate to prioritise your family's needs and create a comfortable Christmas environment. Sometimes, it's necessary to establish boundaries and focus on celebrating within your immediate family unit.

Christmas dinner can be a significant source of stress for neurodivergent individuals. The extended mealtimes, unfamiliar company, and sensory overload from noise and decorations can be overwhelming. Additionally, the pressure to conform to traditional meal expectations, such as a roast dinner with all the trimmings, can be particularly challenging. If your child finds the traditional Christmas dinner stressful, consider alternative options. A simpler meal, like pizza, can be a more enjoyable and less anxiety-inducing choice. Remember, a happy and relaxed Christmas is more important than adhering to strict traditions. Prioritise your child's comfort and wellbeing, and don't hesitate to deviate from the norm.



How can you help?

- Open a dialogue with your child to understand their feelings about Christmas. Are they excited or anxious? Try to identify specific triggers, such as gift-giving, family gatherings, or noisy environments. By understanding these triggers, you can adjust your plans to minimise stress.
- Avoid overwhelming your child with surprises. Instead, prepare them for what to expect to reduce anxiety.
- Respect your child's need for alone time. It's okay for them to retreat to their room to recharge.
- Remember, the goal is to create a positive and enjoyable Christmas experience. Avoid putting undue pressure on your child and prioritise their well-being.
- By understanding their needs and adapting your plans accordingly, you can help make Christmas a special occasion for your neurodivergent family member.
- A quiet space for your child is beneficial all year round, not just in the festive period. This space should be free from decorations and be a safe place for your child to go to when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Schools often make many changes for the Christmas period including decorations, Christmas trees and changing the schedules (especially towards the end of term). Try talking to school about how they can support your child as well as discussing how your child feels about changes.

Clinical Support at Waterloo Lodge School

In addition to providing high-quality education, our school offers comprehensive clinical services to support our pupils' well-being. Our dedicated clinical team includes:

- Speech and Language Therapist
- Occupational Therapist
- Psychotherapist

The team collaborates closely with each pupil and their family to develop personalized support plans. These plans are designed to build on individual strengths, enhance resilience, and create a positive learning environment.

We foster a safe, caring, and nurturing community where clear expectations and consistent boundaries are established. Our approach emphasises strong relationships and a deep understanding of each pupil's unique needs and challenges. We believe that behaviour is a form of communication and strive to promote healthy physical, social, and emotional development in all pupils.

For further information, please email: [**admin@waterlodelodge.co.uk**](mailto:admin@waterlodelodge.co.uk)