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HOW TO SURVIVE, "THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR!!!"

by Sandi Lebenns-Mosher, MS-Ed

We are in the midst of the holiday season, "The most wonderful time of the year". Right? I know that is usually not what comes to my mind first. How about you? Thoughts of stress and anxiety about how to fit it all in when I am already so busy, what do I buy people, how to fit in all of the holiday festivities, further reducing the time I have to prepare and the thoughts of how my child gets so overwhelmed.

2020 brings some new challenges both adding to the stress level but also eliminating some at the same time. Many of the family gatherings may now be virtual or reduced in the amount of people attending and much of our shopping has become online. These factors can certainly help some aspects of the stress and anxiety, but also contribute some others.

Who could have anticipated that we would still be having to change how we live due to Covid-19 in December?



Covid-19 and its restrictions bring a whole new level of stress factors. You might still be working from home, or continue to be furloughed, your children may be still learning virtually or participating in a hybrid model, everyone may be home way more than you're used to making it difficult to prepare at all, not to mention the stress factor of actually contracting the virus.

Now factor in how all of this affects your child on the Autism Spectrum. Under regular circumstances, it can be a very trying time of the year. The need for routine and order are again being disturbed making it difficult for their need for sameness and order. Houses are typically changing in how they look, furniture being changed around, an abundance of different kinds of decorations present, trees inside the house (oh that can be a confusing one), Menorah or Kinara candle lightings, different kinds of music being played, different smells in the house, possibly more baking going on, etc.

Let's take all these factors and take your child on the Autism Spectrum's perspective and work on some proactive strategies to help it be less stressful and indeed turn it into, "The most wonderful time of the year".

As always, **planning ahead** will greatly help. Knowing your child's triggers will be your starting point. If you know that your child will become overwhelmed with changes in your home like furniture being moved around or the additions of different decorations, start early and change one or two things at a time. You can work slowly to help them desensitize to the changes. Children on the spectrum learn best when skills are broken down into their smallest components and when they can be desensitized to things, so let's use that same strategy here as well. You can break tasks down by writing on a calendar or making a list of what will happen on what day. For example, Saturday we will decorate the outside of the house, Sunday will be decorate the inside of the house, Monday will will bake cookies, etc. Refer to it often to let your child know what will be happening today. It also becomes less overwhelming for you by just needing to do one smaller task at a time. Hopefully, a win-win situation for all.





Help your child to predict what will happen during this time by creating as much structure as possible for them. You can create a visual story with pictures of whatever your holiday season will look like, the people they will see, include zoom pictures if you will be having a virtual holiday, practice opening presents, get them involved in the baking or decorating (if it won't overwhelm them). Help your child become part of the process to help them get used to the upcoming changes to their routine. You can track how many days are left to your holiday either on a calendar or by creating a chain with construction paper and taking one off each day until the holiday arrives.

Continue to **review and practice** their calming strategies. Pull out that visual story you may have created for Thanksgiving, visit the calming place you may have created, give them access to those calming fidgets you put together. Don't wait until the next holiday is here to practice these strategies. It would be of great benefit for this to be an ongoing process. Make it a part of your routine so when those calming strategies are needed they have already been learned.

Remembering that the ultimate goal will be to have your child learn the calming strategy they need when they are feeling overwhelmed and use it independently.

Prepare your family with what they need to know about your child. Help them to see and understand that it is not personal that your child doesn't like to be hugged, for example, or that they only eat certain foods. Let them know your child may need a quiet place to go to if they become overwhelmed or may need some



calming things to hold. Preparing your family ahead of time can help it be a more successful event for everyone.

Your child may be excited about some new presents they are anticipating. If they have difficulty letting the thought go and are perseverating on requesting it over and over again, you can try and give them 5 tokens. Each time they talk about their anticipated present they have to give you a token. When all the tokens are finished, so is talking about their anticipated present. Give it a try.

Remember to try and have fun and make memories!!! Take pictures this year and bring them out next year as your visual story. A little preplanning could really help your child tolerate all these changes. Maybe even a little one on one activity they enjoy will help them get away from the crowd a bit while being functionally engaged at the same time. Remember to always provide your child with way more positive praise than corrective statements. We all benefit from hearing someone say, "job well done" !!!

Wishing you and your family a very happy, healthy and safe holiday season.