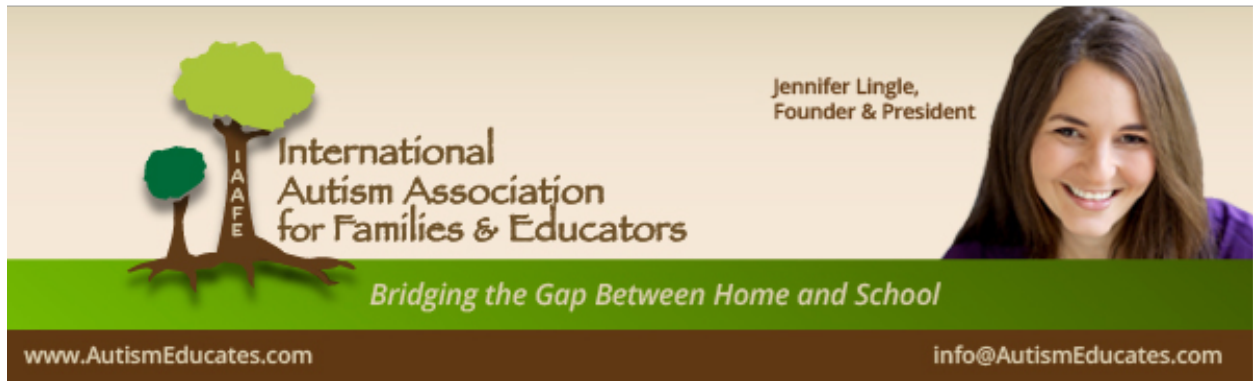


15 Sensory Smart Holiday Strategies

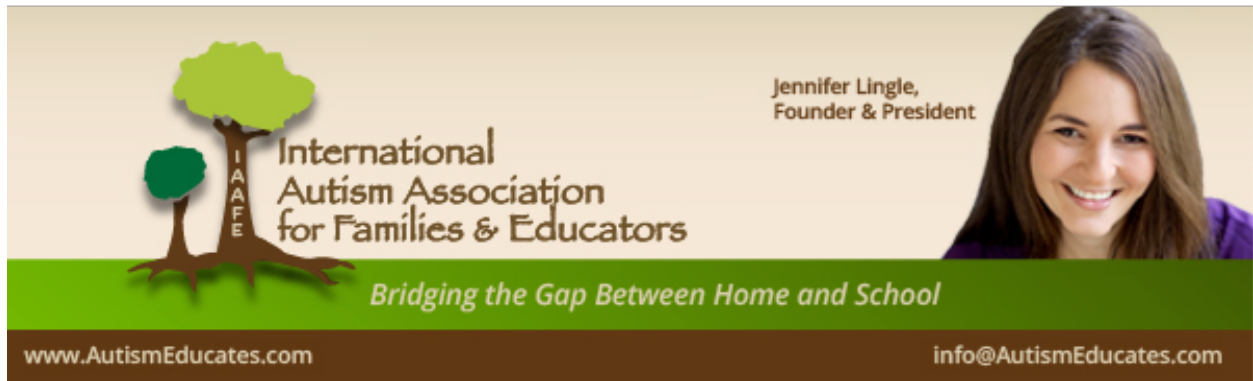
By Lindsey Biel, OTR/L

The holidays can be exciting but stressful for all of us, and even more so for kids, teens, and adults on the autism spectrum. Crowded stores, holiday travel, changes in daily routines, and group gatherings with unpredictable sights, sounds, foods, and people, can make the holidays very difficult for people who thrive on predictability and familiarity. Here are real-life strategies that can help:

1. Let your child know what to expect to reduce anxiety. Visual supports can help. You can have a large calendar or white board on which you write what will happen each day, adding pictures of people or activities as needed. If possible, provide a schedule for each day so your child knows the sequence of events.
2. If you have a lot to accomplish in a given day, create a checklist with words and/or pictures. This will help you manage your time more efficiently and give your child a sense of control over events by crossing off items from the list as they are completed. If you have a lot to do—many stores to go to, household chores to accomplish, or whatever—you can help your child manage multiple transitions better if he knows what’s coming up next. Be sure to schedule in some “down time” in a quiet spot with a book, hand fidget, or some favorite music to avoid overloading your child (and yourself).
3. If you’ll be having gathering at your home, review who will be coming and something interesting about that person. You might mention that Uncle Carl recently bought a new blue car, or that Aunt Edna has a poodle that dances. You can talk about what might be appropriate subjects of discussion with these people, but let the child know that he won’t be *forced* to speak to anyone.
4. Keep up the sensory diet! When there are so many things to do, it’s tempting to let go of therapeutic routines that work for your child. Fifteen minutes in a playground, ten minutes jumping on a mini-trampoline or on a mattress on the floor, giving a deep pressure massage, or doing whatever works best to help your child self-regulate can ultimately *save a lot of* time in terms of behavior management.

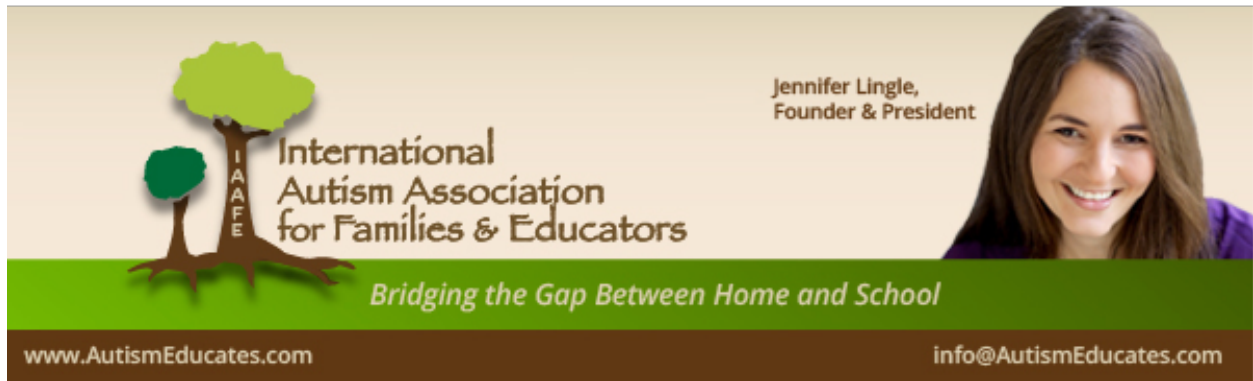


5. If your child is overwhelmed by highly stimulating environments, shop during off hours or online. If you must take your sensitive child to a busy store, consider if it would help for him or her to wear sunglasses and/or a cap to shield eyes from bright lights, and headphones with favorite music (or noise-reducing earmuffs). Some kids do well inhaling an essential oil to pre-empt the barrage of odors in a supermarket or shopping mall. (Visit a good health food store to find a favorite scent. Many kids love sweet orange oil or vanilla.)
6. Letting your child help is a great way to get him to feel part of the festivities. If you are having guests over to your home for a sit-down meal, your child can decorate seating cards. You can take a photo of an ideal place setting and have your child set the table so each person has an identical place setting.
7. Cooking is a wonderful sensory experience and can be very motivating even for the tactile defensive child. Let your child help you measure, pour, mix, blend, and decorate holiday food. Even if you're going to someone else's home to celebrate, help your child to prepare a special side dish or dessert to bring along.
8. You'll find fun holiday craft ideas that you can often easily simplify if you need to. The kids I work with love making pine cone turkeys by adding colored feathers and a felt face with wiggly eyes to a pine cone. For Christmas, we glue sequins or buttons onto a tree made of green construction paper or felt which is pre-cut if needed. Another popular wintertime holiday craft is gluing three Styrofoam balls together (I use a Popsicle stick with glue for stability between the balls, flattened on adjoining surfaces) and decorate it to make a snowman. It's fun to make a Kwanzaa Kinara or a Menorah out of Model Magic, Sculpey, or regular clay. Or you can simply paint a pre-cut Star of David or other holiday symbol and sprinkle glitter on it. You don't have to be especially creative to have fun with holiday crafts. There are loads of easy pre-packaged holiday craft kits at your local craft store and elsewhere. Also, you can go to the Internet for holiday crafts, coloring pages, and other activities. For example, for Christmas you could search for: Christmas kids crafts; Christmas coloring pages; Christmas Dot-to-Dots; Christmas Word Search; Christmas Mazes; Christmas Crossword puzzles, and so on.
9. Bring along activities and toys that your child likes, such as coloring supplies, a book, headphones with music, fidget toys, or whatever can be reasonably transported and used without bothering others. Bring plenty for any other kids to enjoy and share easily,



take along an extra box of crayons, extra containers of Play-doh, and so on. If your child loves using his iPad or another handheld device, he should be allowed to bring it along and use it at acceptable times. If it is used for communication, of course it should always be at hand.

10. Make sure your child wears something comfortable. There's no point in forcing your child into party clothing that will make him or her miserable. Annoying lace and elasticized puffy sleeves on girls' dresses may be intolerable. Your son may be unable to withstand wearing a tie and dress shoes. There may be a simple quick fix like snipping away scratchy threads or wearing a favorite soft shirt and leggings beneath that dress-up outfit. Happily there is wonderful, sensory smart party clothing available. For example, TeresKids.com and Softclothing.net make adorable sensory-friendly party dresses, jackets, tee shirts, and more. Whatever your child wears, be sure to wear it several times before the event, and bring a change of clothing just in case. As always, the key is to be flexible.
11. Remind your child of social expectations. Yes, he should greet each guest, but he does not have to kiss everyone or anyone. Your daughter could say hello and put her hand out for a handshake if she does not wish to hug. Teach your son about keeping all but the closest people at approximately arm's distance so he doesn't stand too close and become a space invader. If you have guests who expect hugs and kisses as a matter of course, explain simply and matter-of-factly that this will not work for your child and what the alternate greeting should be. Also, all of us feel awkward and hard-pressed for a response when we get a weird present. Teach your child to simply say thank you.
12. Let your child know what foods are going to be served, keeping in mind that the food you prepare may look, smell, or taste differently when someone else makes it ... and therefore may not be acceptable to your super-selective eater. Don't force your child to eat something "gross" just because it's the traditional holiday food. If you know your child won't eat turkey, bring along something nutritious you know he will eat. At the same time, do offer him some turkey or whatever others are eating; this may be the time he'll finally try it, especially if there is a trusted friend or relative who likes it.
13. Bring along desserts you know your child enjoys—a *must* if your child is on a gluten-free/casein-free diet. This may be a great opportunity for you to introduce healthier desserts to others. However, you may not be able to control everything that goes into



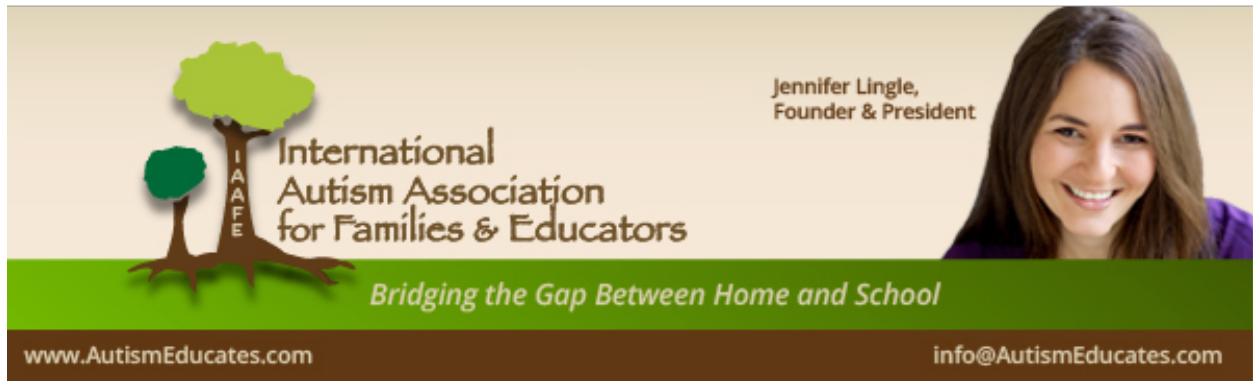
your child's mouth in a larger group. Be prepared for any behavioral reactions such as hyperactivity or moodiness. If you know your child starts getting hyper after eating cake, take him for a walk right after he finishes his dessert.

14. Discuss a break strategy, determining where your child can go and what she can do if she begins to feel overwhelmed. It's much better for your child to take a short break from a gathering than to be trapped in a situation veering toward a meltdown. If you're home, let her know she can politely excuse herself to go to her room if she needs time to self-regulate. If you're elsewhere figure out a safe place early on for your child to retreat to. Explain to the host that your child may need to take a break and ask where a good place might be: a bedroom, a hallway, or elsewhere. Try not to be self-conscious or apologetic about giving your child what his brain and body need. This is the perfect time to explain your child's sensory needs and how you are empowering your child to overcome them.
15. Stick to regular routines. As much as possible, maintain the same basic routines you normally implement to help your child stay on an even keel. Try to wake up, eat, and go to sleep at more or less the same time you usually do. A little flexibility is a great thing, but avoid totally throwing your child's sleep-wake, hunger-satiety cycles off. If you do find that your child's sleep or eating cycle is off-kilter, resume the normal schedule by adjusting bedtime by 15 minutes a night.

Sensory Smart Gifts

Here are a few favorite sensory smart gifts you can find on the www.sensorysmarts.com Toys & Equipment Gift Page unless noted otherwise.

- Self-regulation items such as the Inflatable Green PeaPod, Vibrating Snake, Vibrating Pillow, and noise-reducing headphones.
- Hand Tools such as Thinking Putty, Play-doh and Fun Factory, Tangle Toys, and pop beads.
- Movement toys and equipment like the Hop-It Ball, Rocking Rody, Dizzy Disc Jr., Pure Fun ladybug trampoline, OgoSport, and Super Skipper.
- Arts & Crafts projects such as Crayola's My Tissue Art, Kumon's *Easy Crafts* book, Puppet kits; and Perler or Fun Fusion bead kits.



- Classic toys and games such as Play-Doh Fun Factory, Lite Brite, The Sneaky Snacky Squirrel, Tinker Toys, Slinky, MagnaTiles
- Weighted Items such as a medicine ball, weighted vest, weighted lap pad, weighted hoodie (sensorycritters.com), and others.
- Musical instruments such as drums, mini-pianos (Schoenhut), organ keyboards, harmonica, and others

For more sensory smart ideas for the holidays, sensory diet activities, and practical solutions for real-life challenges such as tooth brushing, hair washing, noise and light sensitivity, picky eating, and school issues, please read *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit www.sensorysmarts.com and *Sensory Processing Challenges* (www.sensoryprocessingchallenges.com).

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