



HOLIDAY STRATEGIES FOR SENSITIVE KIDS

Lighten the sensory-stress load and help your child make the most of the season...

BY LINDSEY BIEL, OTR/L

As lovely as it is to be with friends and family around the holidays, let's face it: the holidays are stressful for all of us—and even more so for people on the spectrum with sensory challenges. Holiday travel, changes in daily routines plus group gatherings with unfamiliar sights, sounds, foods, and people can make the holidays very difficult for people with sensory issues who thrive on predictability and familiar routines. Here are some tips for parents to make the holidays easier.

PREPARE YOUR CHILD IN ADVANCE

Let your child know what to expect over the holidays to reduce anxiety about unwelcome surprises. It helps to have a large calendar on which you can write what will happen each day, adding pictures of people or activities if needed. If possible, provide a schedule for each day just like elementary school teachers do so your child knows the sequence of events.

If you have a lot to accomplish in a given day, create a written or picture checklist. This technique can

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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. Don't forget to take breaks! Fifteen minutes in the playground, sitting quietly looking at a picture book, or doing whatever works best to help your child self-regulate could ultimately

save a lot of time in terms of behavior management.

If you are going to have a gathering at your home, review who will be coming and discuss something nice about that person. You might mention that Cousin Joey recently bought a new car or that Aunt Rose has a dog that does tricks.

Remind your child of social expectations. Yes, he must greet each guest, but no, he does not have to kiss everyone. He could say hello and put his hand out for a handshake if he does not wish to hug someone. Teach him about keeping

DRESSING UP

While you may love wearing your best clothing for the holidays, it's never

worth forcing your child into party clothing that will make him miserable. Scratchy appliqués, tickly lace, and elasticized puffy sleeves on girls' dresses may be intolerable. Your son may be unable to withstand wearing a tie and dress shoes.

Fortunately, 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 give it a test run several times before the event, and bring a change of clothing just in case. As always, the key is to be flexible!



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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, Target and elsewhere. You can also 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 Word Search; Christmas Mazes; Christmas Crossword puzzles, and so on.

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.

KEEP YOUR CHILD COMFORTABLE

Holidays should be happy days. While you should always expect positive behavior, you may need extra supports. Bring along activities and toys that your child finds soothing such as coloring supplies, a book, headphones with music, fidget tools, 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 dough and so on.

If your child loves using his iPad or other 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.

Remember that despite all the holiday busyness, your child's sensory systems still need to be addressed. If you

most people at arm's length so he doesn't stand too close and become a space invader.

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 feel trapped in a situation that is veering toward sensory overload. If you're home, let her know she can politely excuse herself to go to her room if she needs time to chill out. But if you're elsewhere, figure out a safe place where your child can retreat. 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.

GET YOUR CHILD INVOLVED

Holidays are a great time to work on fine motor and organizational skills and 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.

You'll find fun holiday craft ideas that you can often easily simplify. Every year the kids I work with love making pine cone turkeys by adding colored feathers, a felt face, and wiggly eyes to a large pine cone. For Christmas, we glue sequins or buttons onto a tree made of green construction paper or felt which I will pre-cut if scissors are too hard or dangerous for the child to use. Another popular wintertime holiday craft is gluing three styrofoam balls together (I use a popsicle stick with glue for stability between the balls which I flatten on adjoining surfaces) and decorate it to make a snowman. You can make a Kwanzaa Kinara or a Menorah out of Model Magic, Sculpey, or regular clay. Sometimes we simply paint a pre-cut Star of David or other holiday symbol and sprinkle glitter on it.

WEIGHTY ISSUE—Weighted clothing such as vests or hoodies can help your child feel calm and organized.





TEN SENSORY SMART GIFTS

- 1 **Hand Fidgets** such as Tangle Toys (Tangle Jr., Textured Tangle, Tangle Therapy), Koosh Balls, popbeads, squeeze balls
- 2 **Weighted Items** such as a medicine ball (sporting goods store), weighted hoodie (sensorycritters.com), weighted blanket, weighted vest, weighted lap pad (sensacalm.com, weightedwearables.com, Sommerfly.com and others)
- 3 **Gross Motor games** like the Zoomball (PFOT.com), OgoSport (most toy stores), HoneyBee Hop (toy stores)
- 4 **Trampolines and Mini-trampolines** from therapy catalogs, sporting goods stores, and sites such as Needakrebounders.com and Funandfunction.com
- 5 **Riding Toys** like the Hop-It Ball, Rocking Rody or stand-alone Rody, Kettler trikes and bikes, Razor scooters, Dizzy Disc, Jr.
- 6 **Cozy items** including the Cloud b Sleep Sheep and Dozy Dolphin, vibrating stuffed toys and pillows available in most therapy catalogs and in some stores
- 7 **Hideaways** like pop-up tents and playhouses, decorated with comfy pillows and bean bags
- 8 **Arts & Crafts** projects such as Alex's Markers by Number, My Tissue Art, Clay Pictures; Lauri Hand Puppet kits; and Perler or Fun Fusion bead kits
- 9 **Classic toys and games** like Mr. Potato Head, Play-Doh Fun Factory Set, Lite Brite, Tinker Toys, Slinky, MagnaTiles
- 10 **Musical instruments** such as drums, mini-pianos (Schoenhut), organ keyboards, harmonicas, and others

In addition to the resources mentioned, you can also find most of these items at sensorysmarts.com.

For more on sensory diet, sensory friendly clothing, and other recommendations for holidays and special events, please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit sensorysmarts.com.

have a sensory diet in place (and I hope you do), keep it up. If your child needs to do 15 jumping jacks and crash into a pile of sofa cushions 15 times in order to sit down to eat, do it. If your child needs 20 minutes in a quiet, softly lit room with a hand fidget in order to self-regulate, so be it.

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.

Praise and rewards are always appropriate if your child has behaved to the best of his or her ability. You are not spoiling your child when you celebrate his success!

HOLIDAY FOODS

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 not be acceptable to your super-picky eater. Don't force your child to eat something "gross" just because it's the traditional holiday food. If your child won't eat turkey, don't just load up on the potatoes instead. 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.

If you feel judged or criticized about giving in to food issues, explain that you have found that food battles are counterproductive, and that

while you are working on expanding your child's food repertoire, a holiday meal is certainly not the appropriate time to work on it.

Bring along acceptable desserts you know your child enjoys—a must if your child is on a gluten-free/





MORE HOLIDAY GIFT IDEAS

Check out these specialty companies for super-soft clothing and sensory-friendly toys that are sure to be a hit this year:



- Awearables LLC** allermates.com
- Animal Agentz** animalagentz.com
- Autism Products for kids** autism-products.com
- Autism toys and more** autismtoysandmore.com
- Autism Treasure Chest** autismtreasurechest.com
- Automoblox** automoblox.com
- Discovery Toys Inc** discoverytoysinc.com
- EzSox** ezsox.com
- Fat Brain Toys** fatbraintoy.com
- Fun and Function** funandfunction.com
- Got-Autism** got-autism.com
- HABA** habausa.com
- Kid Companions Chewelry** kidcompanions.com
- Lakeshore Learning Materials** lakeshorelearning.com

- Noteabilities** noteabilities.com (see ad on p. 44)
- One Step Ahead** onestepahead.com
- Ozmofun** ozmofun.com
- Pocket Full of Therapy** pfot.com
- Plan Toys** plantoy.com
- Playability Toys** playabilitytoys.com
- Sensory Critters** sensorycritters.com
- Sensory Spectrum Shop** sensoryspectrumshop.com
- Soft Clothing** softclothing.net
- Speech Bin** speechbin.com
- Step Forward** 123stepforward123.com
- Therapy Shoppe** therapyshoppe.com
- Thinking Moves** thinkingmoves.com
- Toys to Grow On** toystogrowon.com
- Vision-audio EASE games** vision-audio.com



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 antsy after eating a cookie, take him for a walk right after he finishes his dessert.

STICK TO REGULAR ROUTINES

If your child naps or if you plan to stay overnight and your child struggles with sleep, bring along necessary items such as your child's pillow, sheets, nightlight, or white noise machine.

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 fine but avoid throwing your child's sleep-wake, hunger-satiety cycles off. If you do find that your child's sleep or eating cycle is off, resume his normal schedule by adjusting bedtime by 15 minutes a night. ◀

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