



Supporting Caregivers with Challenging Children
Strategies and Tools to Help You and Your Child Stay Regulated Together

Surviving the Holidays

Important Points

- **Holiday Joy** – The winter holiday season often brings lots of joy with family gatherings, special celebrations and meals, and breaks from school and other routines.
- **Holiday Stress** – These same things can also bring a lot of stress, especially for families with challenging children. Lack of the usual routine and structure, diet changes (extra sugar!), cancelled therapy sessions, travel, gatherings with people who may not be as tolerant of challenging children, and additional tasks and events can contribute to stress.
- **Family Expectations** – Many people have specific ideas about what makes the holidays special for them and understandably want to recreate and share those experiences with their family. Being thoughtful and having a plan will help make those special experiences also enjoyable for your child.
- **Regulated Bodies** – Ensuring that both you and your child can keep your bodies regulated will help with being present, joyful, and resilient for those special holiday traditions. Prioritize using the sensory strategies that help you and your child feel calm. Make sure to take any portable sensory tools with you when you travel. Get outside as much as possible! Cold air can help reset the nervous system to a more positive state.
- **Safe Relationships** – Make an effort to stay attuned to your child so you can help them co-regulate when they need your support. Create consistency by keeping the same bedtime and wake up routines, even if the rest of the daily activities are different. Don't forget to model taking care of yourself and regulating. Relax some of your own expectations about the holidays and find joy in the relationship with your child.
- **Balancing Act** – Predictable routines creates a sense of safety, which is why they are so important to help challenging children feel more regulated. On the other hand, novelty sparks joy and curiosity, which is why so many love holiday activities. However, if there are too many new experiences the brain can feel stressed. Striking the right balance between routine and holiday events is important.

- **Planning for Success** – Whether you are attending a family gathering, going on a special holiday outing, taking a family photo, traveling, or preparing a holiday meal a little advance planning can make the experience easier. Here are a few tips to keep in mind.
 - Do something beforehand to regulate you and your child’s bodies.
 - Foreshadow for your child what to expect as well as what will be expected of them.
 - Identify safe spaces the child can retreat to if they need a break, such as a quiet bedroom, the family car with a caregiver, or anywhere away from the holiday hubbub.
 - Have familiar and safe foods and comfort objects on hand. Do not forget to bring any portable sensory tools as well.
 - Check in on your child regularly and pay attention to signs they might be getting overloaded (e.g. flushed face or ears, rapid breathing, clammy skin, pinched or pained facial expression, extra silly or wild behavior)
 - Relax, be flexible about your own expectations, and focus on enjoying your relationship with your family.

A Few Easy Things to Try

- Reflect on the holiday experiences you most value. Prioritize which of those are most important for you to share with your child. Are there others you can adapt or let go of?
- Make a plan in advance for supporting your child through those special experiences. Prepare by maintaining essential daily routines, incorporating regulating input before events, and having sensory tools or strategies and calm spaces identified to use if needed during those events.

For More Information

Short and Sweet

- Tips for a Sensory-Friendly Holiday – <https://integratedchildrens.com/tips-for-a-sensory-friendly-holiday/> (Integrated Children’s Therapy website)
- Supporting Children And Teens During This Holiday Season – <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/supporting-children-and-teens-during-this-holiday-season> (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website)

Deeper Dives

- Supporting Children During the Holiday Season – [https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum/prepare-trainers/prepua/ure-newsletter-\(volume-9-issue-2\)/supporting-children-during-the-holiday-season](https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum/prepare-trainers/prepua/ure-newsletter-(volume-9-issue-2)/supporting-children-during-the-holiday-season) (National Association of School Psychologists website – Links to webinars and toolkits)

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