



Packed full of tips, ideas and activities to help make your Christmas less stressful

SNAP

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Christmas survival guide tips

While Christmas can be a very exciting and fun time for some, children and young people with additional needs can find the change in routine and increased social demands very stressful, rather than experiencing the joy others may expect.

When it comes to gift giving there is an expectation that children should want to give and receive gifts, however for a young person with additional needs the idea of Christmas presents can create a lot of anxiety. They could want to know what the presents are before unwrapping them, to eliminate the anticipation of surprise. Or they may not want their Christmas presents to be wrapped up at all.

These adjustments could make your child or young person cope better with the occasion, allowing the whole family to have a more enjoyable Christmas experience.

Remove the anticipation of surprise

While some children may love surprises, if you know your young person has difficulties with the unknown, it would be beneficial removing the element of surprise from their Christmas presents. Ideas for doing so include leaving presents unwrapped and putting them in a gift bag, showing your child their gifts before wrapping them up, or popping a picture of the present on the gift tag so they know what it is they are opening.

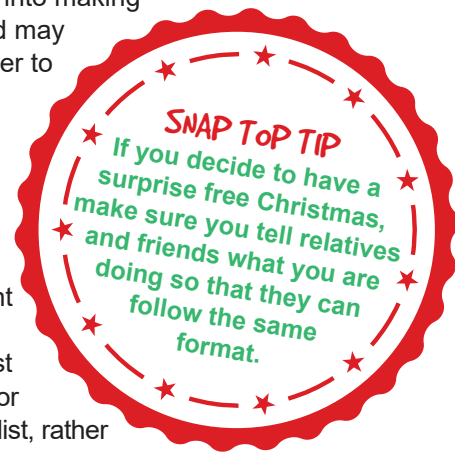
Stagger the opening of presents

Being faced with a large number of gifts on Christmas morning can be overwhelming for a child with additional needs. If they struggle with the amount of presents they are being faced with, stagger opening them over the course of a couple of days. If you find this infuriates their siblings, don't stop their brother or sister from opening their gifts all in one go. Find a method that works for all the family, even if that means each child does things differently. You could ask relatives to limit the number of gifts they are buying – one special gift could be preferable to a lot of smaller gifts, as it reduces the number of presents they are faced with opening.

Provide friends and relatives with gift ideas

It can be a struggle suggesting gift ideas for relatives and friends if your child or young person

doesn't have an interest in toys or games. Parents can sometimes feel pressured into making suggestions that their child may not necessarily like. In order to get around this, we would suggest making a list of specific gift ideas, and if questioned by a relative or friend explain that these are the things your child will get the most enjoyment from. You could look at creating an Amazon Wishlist online. You can then email or message a link to the wish list, rather than having to provide a handwritten list in person.



Ensure the gift is ready to go

When buying presents for your child, ensure that they are ready to be used from the moment they are given to them. This could involve some preparation beforehand; removing the packaging, sorting batteries if required, and making sure the toy is built. All this could contribute to preventing your young person from becoming frustrated and losing control.





Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No. 1

Choosing toys for children with disabilities

It is often difficult to choose a toy for a child with an additional need or disability. It is important to buy something appropriate, but also fun and stimulating. The following considerations may help when buying toys for children with disabilities:

- Multisensory appeal – does the toy respond with lights, sounds or movement? Are there contrasting colours? Does it have a scent? Is there texture?
- Sensory considerations – bear in mind any sensory difficulties the child may have when assessing the suitability of the toy. Is the child particularly sensitive to flashing lights, sudden noises etc?
- Method of activation – will the toy respond with lights, sounds or movement? What is the force required to activate? What are the number and complexity of steps required to activate?
- Where will the toy be used – can the toy be used in a variety of positions such as side-lying or on a wheelchair tray? Will the toy be easy to store? Is there space in the home?
- Opportunities for success – can play be open-ended with no definite right or wrong way? Is it adaptable to the child's individual style, ability and pace?
- Current popularity – is it a toy that any child would like? Does it tie-in with other activities like TV, films, books, clothing etc?
- Self-expression – does the toy allow for creativity, uniqueness, and choice making? Will it give the experience with a variety of media?
- Adjustability – does it have adjustable height, sound volume, speed, level of difficulty?
- Child's individual characteristics – does the toy provide activities that reflect both developmental and chronological ages? Does it reflect the child's interests and age?
- Safety and durability – consider the child's size and strength in relation to the toy's durability. Is the toy and its parts sized appropriately? Does the toy have moisture resistance? Can it be washed and cleaned?
- Potential for interaction – will the child be an active participant during use? Will the toy encourage social engagement with others?
- Ease of use – can the toy be played with independently? Will it require assistance from a helper?

Use this list to help you when looking at toys in shops or online. The SNAP Directory lists some specialist suppliers in the Toys, Clothing & Specialist Equipment section.

Places to source specialist gifts

If you're struggling to find suitable gift ideas for your child or young person, have a look through the links below for alternative organisations to source specialist presents from.



Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No. 1

Sensory toy ideas

Rompa: A Sensory Christmas

<https://www.rompa.com/sensory-christmas>

Sensory Toy Warehouse: Gift ideas

<https://www.sensorytoywarehouse.com/>

Sense Toys: Christmas guide ideas

<https://www.sensetoys.com/collections/christmas-gifts-stocking-fillers>

Specialist catalogues and toy collections

Fledglings catalogue

<https://fledglings.shop/collections/toys-sensory-learning-resources>



“I stopped worrying about what other people think and do at Christmas. Our family does what works for us now and we’re all a lot happier for it.”



Christmas survival guide tips

Change for children with additional needs can be somewhat of a struggle. When it comes to Christmas, expecting your child to accept their home environment being drastically different is a very big ask. In order to reduce the impact Christmas decorations have on your child or young person, preparation is crucial. Try to think about the tools you use with your child during everyday life. How could you apply these tools to Christmas to ensure things run as smoothly as possible?



Information Sheet No.2

Decorations

Please see below a series of tips families have found useful when preparing their child for the changes that take place over the Christmas holidays.

Preparation tips

Involve your child as much as possible, but only if you feel this would be beneficial. If your young person is someone who likes to be included in the process, you may want to let them choose some of the decorations you decide to have up in your home. Allowing them to have ownership over how the house is going to look will take away the element of surprise, and will help to eliminate some of their anxieties.

Show them photographs of previous years, as they may not remember how different the house looked. If you have any pictures or video footage of your young person with the decorations displayed in the background, these may help trigger their emotional memories.

Consider putting your decorations up gradually, in order to avoid overwhelming your child. If you have an artificial tree, think about bringing it in to your home a few days before decorating it. That way, your young person has time to process and adjust to the changes that are about to happen. Sometimes parents feel it's easier to put decorations up while their children aren't at home, although please bear in mind how unsettling it may be to return to an environment that looks completely different.

Equally, the decorations can be taken down in more gradual stages.

Use visual tools to help explain to your child that the Christmas tree won't be a permanent fixture in your family home. Consider introducing a Christmas Calendar, where you can clearly mark what's happening when, and countdown to each event. Does your young person know when the tree is being taken down? Are their anxieties heightened because they believe the decorations will be staying up forever? Things we may naturally know could be causing your child lots of worries.

Think about friends and family, and how they have their homes decorated.

When preparing your young person for the changes that are about to happen in your own home, don't forget to prepare them for how other people's homes are going to look too.





Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No. 2

Sensory considerations for Christmas

When identifying what sensory issues could become apparent for your child over the Christmas period, think about looking at things from their perspective. Is their environment too loud or too quiet? Is the constant changing of the Christmas lights causing them considerable amounts of stress? Christmas can become chaotic at the best of times; however for a child with special needs, having their routine and home

environment changed so considerably can be extremely distressing. Consider how certain factors could be creating increased anxiety. Are the noise levels manageable? Do you feel the different smells are becoming a bit too much? Having a safe space to escape to could be the key to helping your child to cope over the Christmas period.

Christmas free zone

Keep in mind the confusion of Christmas could cause your child to become completely overwhelmed. Creating a room or space for them to go to, that has absolutely no reference to Christmas, could be extremely comforting for them. Allow your child the freedom to take themselves off to their Christmas Free Zone if they feel things are getting too much. If you don't feel a separate space is necessary, you could limit your decorations to one or two rooms, and ensure everywhere else remains the same.

If siblings are struggling with the thought of minimal decorations, consider letting them decorate their own bedrooms. That way you're giving everyone some ownership.





Christmas survival guide tips

If your child is a particularly anxious person, having them well prepared for the activities and events that are going to be happening over Christmas is crucial. Consider which resources you currently use to support your young person with managing their daily routine. How can you apply these trusted methods to make Christmas as comfortable as possible?

Below is a selection of tips parents have used to make the holidays more manageable for all the family.

Preparation tips

Use a Christmas calendar or visual timetable to clearly display which activities and events are happening and when.

Talk through the timetable with your child to check they are aware of upcoming events, ensuring they understand there are going to be some changes to their normal daily routine. Consider showing your child photographs of the places you are going to, so they are prepared for what to expect when they are there. Giving them as much information as possible in the lead up to the event could reduce their concerns considerably.

Keep their routine the same for as long as possible.

If your child likes their days to be structured, make sure you maintain this as much as you can over Christmas. For example, you may feel pressurised into letting them stay up later as it's the school holidays, however this could really throw your young person and leave them tired and confused.

Consider speaking with your child's school, to see if they can use the same strategies as you.

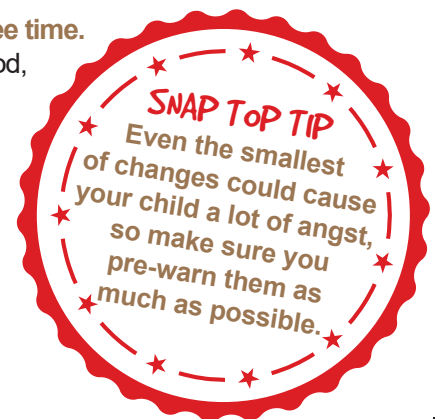
When you decide to start preparing your young person for Christmas, make sure everyone else is on board too. The normal school routine is always abandoned in the



close run up to Christmas and most children love the different and exciting festive activities, but for children with additional needs this can be a difficult and stressful change. See if the school would consider creating a visual timetable or calendar to have up in the classroom, so that your child can be prepared for the changes that are happening in school as well as at home.

Allow for Christmas free time.

Over the Christmas period, there are lots of added expectations. If you feel your child is becoming overwhelmed, consider factoring in time for them to be away from the festivities. Celebrate all successes, no matter how small, and try not to dwell on the situations where your child may have struggled.





Christmas survival guide tips

Here at SNAP we have researched and compiled a selection of Makaton, Braille and BSL resources, tips and ideas that you may find useful over the Christmas holidays.

Makaton

Christmas signs and symbols

Christmas specific Makaton signs and symbols can be quickly found online from a variety of sources. Go to: <https://www.makaton.org>

Christmas carols

If you are looking for Christmas Carol resources, Makaton has produced a selection of books and information sheets that contain both words and drawings of signs. The carols featured include Away in a Manger, We Wish You a Merry Christmas, and more. There is a charge for both the books and information sheets. For details on costs and how to order, go to:

<https://www.makaton.org>

Makaton: A first Christmas story book

Makaton has produced a Christmas Story printable resource, which includes all the signs and symbols required to help talk to your child about the Christmas Nativity Story. There is a small charge to download the resource. For more details visit: <https://www.makaton.org>

If you are looking for free, printable Christmas activities to complete with your child over the school holidays, Makaton has produced a selection of templates for you to try including: Make Your Own Christmas Cards, Decorate the Christmas Tree, and The Christmas Memory Game. To download your copies, go to: <https://www.makaton.org>





Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No.4

British Sign Language

Christmas books

Deaf Books has produced a selection of Christmas books that include British Sign Language within them. The different books they can provide include: BSL Christmas Signs Flashcards, BSL Christmas Songs with Signs, and a selection of specific Christmas songs. Head to the link below for more details. <http://www.deafbooks.co.uk/>

BSL Christmas resources and activities

The company Twinkl provide a variety of British Sign Language Christmas resources, which can be looked at online. In order to download the

resources, there is a subscription fee required. Resources include BSL Christmas Songs, BSL Christmas Card Activities, BSL Christmas Signs, and more. If you would like to learn more about the products Twinkl produce, go to: <http://www.twinkl.co.uk/search> and type in BSL Christmas.

Signed stories app

Available on the iTunes Store for Apple devices, the Signed Stories app has best-selling children's books performed in British Sign Language including several Christmas themed books. The app is free to download and there is a charge for the books.

Braille

Letters from Santa

Santa has contacted his friends at the Royal National Institute for the Blind to help him reply to blind or partially-sighted children in braille, audio or large print. See the website for more details. <https://www.rnib.org.uk/get-involved/donate/letter-from-santa/>.

If you are struggling to find suitable gifts for a child or young person who is blind or partially sighted, Braille Works has produced a gift guide according to age range that you may find helpful. <https://brailleworks.com/christmas-gifts-for-children-with-blindness/>



Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No.5

Parent Tips

“I think the most beneficial thing that I have learnt over the years is to remain **CALM** and remember that Christmas only lasts a few days. If a situation becomes too much, I make sure to remove myself and take a few minutes to gather my thoughts before reacting.”

“Something that has really helped us over the Christmas holidays is making time to **RELAX**. There are so many different activities and events going on, it is easy to agree to everything and become overwhelmed. Not to mention the expense of it all. I have learnt that it is okay to say no if things are becoming too much. Christmas free time is really crucial for us as a family.”

“A big turning point for us was taking the element of **SURPRISE** out of Christmas. We no longer wrap our son’s presents as the stress of the unknown really heightens his anxiety. The same applies to putting up the decorations. We will always allow him to be involved if he wishes, and will give him plenty of warning as to when they are going up, and also when they are being put away.”

“It has taken me many years to master, but I have now given up worrying about what other people are doing over Christmas and have started focusing on what **MAKES IT WORK FOR US** as a family. Relatives who aren’t so understanding will always question our decisions, but I have learnt to let these

“We have found several key **STRATEGIES** that seem to work really well for us over the Christmas holidays. Keeping things as “normal” as possible really helps make things more comfortable for our child. If we are eating out anywhere we will always take her preferred cutlery with us, and we’ve always got a bag of favourite things on hand to keep her happy when we are visiting friends or relatives.”

“Asking for **HELP** has always been something I have struggled with which is why I have found online support so beneficial. I have joined some great support groups on Facebook that I can access anytime I may need some extra help over the Christmas break. It is also nice knowing that you are not alone, and that a lot of struggles you may be experiencing others have also gone through

“I have learnt along the way that **INTRODUCING THINGS GRADUALLY** and letting my son do things when he is ready works much better as it makes Christmas less overwhelming for him. We leave his presents under the tree and let him go to them when he is ready – Sometimes this can take days. To start with we did find it upsetting, but we have learnt to accept that these are the adjustments we need to make in order for Christmas to be more manageable for him.”

“When I first heard about the idea of using a visual **TIMETABLE** I wasn’t sure how successful it would be for our family, however after giving it a try a couple of years ago it is now such a crucial part of our Christmas. I find we need it more so once Christmas is over, as my daughter really struggles with the festivities being over and things going back to normal. It is also a great way of preparing her for what will be happening when. It certainly reduces her anxiety.”

“I think the hardest but most liberating part for me was **ACCEPTING** Christmas wasn’t going to be quite as I wanted it to be. It took me a long time to get there, but I now accept that we do things slightly different to others, and that that is okay. It is still enjoyable, which is all that matters to us.”



Christmas survival guide tips

When trying to keep your children entertained in the run up to Christmas, you may find yourself looking for festive apps to keep them amused. The website **A Day in Our Shoes** has produced a list of 20 fun, educational, Christmas apps for children and young people with additional needs. Included in the recommended list are apps that work on vocabulary building, picture identification, and much more.

Click on the link below for more information.

<https://adayinourshoes.com/christmas-apps/>

Festive Apps for all the family

See below a selection of suggested Christmas apps that can be accessed by all the family.



Toca hair salon – Christmas Gives you the opportunity to cut, colour and style Santa's hair and beard. This special Christmas Edition allows you to choose between styling Santa and creating a Christmas Tree. The app is free to download, and is available for Apple devices only.



Christmas tree Allows you to decorate your very own Christmas Tree with a variety of different ornaments. There are calming sound effects and different festive backdrops to choose from. The app is free to download, and allows you to decorate several trees at a time, so all the family can get involved.



Christmas countdown! 2022 Tells you how many days, weeks, hours, minutes, seconds and heartbeats until Christmas. Choose characters like Santa, Penguin and Snowman.



Message from Santa! Free personalised phone call or video message from Santa Claus. Send and receive text messages with Santa, or leave him a voicemail with a wish list.



Manage Christmas A Christmas gift list manager for those wanting to stick to a budget and organise their gift ideas and purchases.



NORAD tracks Santa Claus Watch the days countdown to the start of Santa's Yuletide journey around the world; play games, read stories and more.

Sensory Apps

Sensory Apphouse has produced a range of sensory apps that have been designed to help with relaxation, developing communication, and stimulation. All of their apps are switch accessible and can be accessed by Apple and Android users.

For more information about the apps they offer and where to download them, click on the link below. <https://www.sensoryapphouse.com/>

Other Sensory Apps include: Fun Bubbles, Fluidity, Light Box, Art of Glow, and iLoveFireworks.





Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No.7

Internet and social media safety

At The SNAP Centre and on the SNAP helpline we are often asked for help with this particular issue. Increasingly, children and young people are learning, playing and socialising using online resources. Parents are often 'left behind' as technology advances and consoles, mobile phones, tablets and computers are upgraded. New Apps, software, online games and social media platforms are introduced frequently and it is difficult for parents to ensure they are fully protecting their vulnerable young person from potential hazards and negative experiences online.

With technology devices being top of the list for things to buy children and young people for Christmas, SNAP has gathered some information sources and websites that offer tips and guidance to help navigate this tricky topic.

www.saferinternet.org.uk - This website has a section for parents and carers giving e-safety tips, advice and resources to help children and young people stay safe on the Internet.

www.childnet.com - The parents section on this website gives all the information you need to keep your child safe online. If you're puzzled by parental controls or would like to know more about gaming, this section can help. There are useful tips to keep up to speed with what young people are doing online and ways to keep your child safe.

www.internetmatters.org - Advice and simple things you can do to make sure your children are using the Internet safely, from pre-school to teens.

www.connectsafely.org/safety-tips-advice/ - Tips and advice on all aspects of online activity, with parent guides on topics such as cyberbullying, Snapchat, mobile phones, cyber security and Virtual World Safety Tips for Parents of Teens.

Learning disabilities, autism and internet safety: A parent's guide - The charity Cerebra has produced a useful guide on all aspects of Internet safety for parents of children and young people with learning disabilities and autism. <https://cerebra.org.uk/download/learning-disabilities-autism-and-internet-safety/>

If you would a link to our full SNAP internet and social media safety sheet let us know.

SNAP TOP TIP

If friends and relatives are struggling with gift ideas for your children, why not suggest an iTunes voucher, so they can purchase any apps they may like.



Christmas survival guide tips

Food for thought

If you're planning on introducing new foods, don't leave it until the last minute and expect your child to try things all at once. In the run up to Christmas, think about gradually incorporating different ingredients into their normal dinners to see how they get on. You could even put the food on a separate plate to their main meal, and give them the option of trying it if they want to. That way when it gets to Christmas Day and they're presented with a different dinner, they won't be completely confused by the new ingredients you have included.

Consider having them help choose the menu. If you're expecting your young person to have a traditional Christmas Dinner, why not offer to include some of their favourite foods too? Using visual tools, you could show your child what you are planning on serving and ask them if there are any additions they would like to be made to the menu. If expecting them to eat a roast dinner is going to be too difficult, how about making them a different dinner altogether? Try not to get pressurised in to serving something just because you feel you should.

Think through the length of time you're expecting to spend at the dinner table. Christmas dinner is traditionally all about sitting together at a table for a long, leisurely meal. This may be a huge challenge for a child who struggles to wait, sit for long, or cope with the social conversation. Perhaps think about your expectations and how you can make it easier for your child to manage.

If a sit down meal seems too stressful, why not have a buffet? Giving your child a choice over what food they eat could be really beneficial. By having a buffet, you are allowing them to have ownership over their Christmas Dinner. You could even incorporate some family favourites too. That way it isn't as noticeable if your child with additional needs chooses not to have the same foods as the rest of the family, which would work well if you have relatives visiting who aren't so understanding.



Information Sheet No.8

Food



Expecting your child to accept having their home environment changed over the Christmas Holidays can be a big ask, especially if they rely on routine. While they may have been well prepared for the display of decorations around the home, they may not be expecting the dinner table to look different too. If your child is used to using certain cutlery, make sure you stick with the same on Christmas Day. Having their food presented on a different plate could be the reason they decide not to eat dinner.

Too much sugar! Christmas goes hand in hand with over-indulgence and eating too much of the 'naughty' foods. Too many sweet foods and drinks may have an adverse affect on your child's behaviour. Try to pace them if you can, or time their sugar rush for a time when great-auntie isn't going to witness it and give an opinion on your parenting style!



Christmas survival guide tips

Information Sheet No. 8

Spending Christmas away from the family home

If you've decided to spend the Christmas Holidays round a relatives or friends, make sure your young person is well prepared for the trip. Consider thinking about the following things:-

Seating – If you don't feel your child is going to be comfortable sitting at a table to eat their dinner, ask your relatives or friends if they can create a quiet space for them to sit separately. It would be good to broach this subject several weeks before the big day, so that there is plenty of time to sort the suggested adjustments.

Cutlery – As mentioned above, if your young person likes to eat their meals using certain cutlery, consider taking this with you. You could prepare a bag with all the essentials in to

make your child feel as comfortable as possible.

Choice of food – It would be good to check exactly what food is being served well in advance. If you feel the choices on offer aren't going to be to your child's taste, suggest taking something for them that can be heated up quickly in the oven. By doing so, you could avoid the awkwardness of your child saying they don't like the food that has been offered to them.

Time – If your young person is struggling with the thought of spending Christmas Day at a different house, let them know a time you are going to be leaving and try to stick to it. If they know exactly what time they will be going back home again, this should minimise their anxieties around the day.





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