CHRISTMAS SURVIVAL GUIDE



HAPPY CHRISTMAS

INTRODUCTION

For those who celebrate Christmas it is often a time of fun, friendship and lots of festive food!

Decorations transform homes and public places, our calendars get filled with events and catching up with friends and family, our fridges get crammed with food for the big day and our bank accounts get considerably lighter.

Whilst many people can't wait for the Christmas season to start, it is important to remember that children, young people and adults with additional needs may need extra support at this time and adjustments to be made to ensure they can feel comfortable and enjoy the festivities.

SNAP's annual Christmas Survival Guide aims to give you ideas on adapting Christmas to suit the needs of your family.

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BEFORE THE BIG DAY



PREPARATION

It can often seem that the shops start stocking the Christmas items earlier and earlier each year and many people like to get the most out of their decorations by putting them up in November. Even if you wait to start celebrating until closer to the big day, it can be really helpful to think carefully about when and how to prepare your child or young person for the upcoming changes around them.

SCHOOL ROUTINE CHANGES

Christmas performances, carol concerts, class parties and other festive activities can often take over the school timetable during December, throwing out the consistent routines that many of our children rely on. Finding out key dates and changes in advance can help you prepare your child. Your child might need these events explained to them in a visual way such as using photos, visual timetable or a social story, especially if they have never experienced them before. Speak to your child's teacher about how they can ensure your child understands what is expected of them during these events.

DOWN TIME

On top of lots happening in school we often fill our family calendars with fun events and activities over the Christmas period which can leave children and young people feeling overstimulated or overwhelmed afterwards, even if they enjoy it at the time. Try planning in some extra "down time" into your weekly routine to compensate, and consider spacing things out as much as possible. With older children it can be helpful to agree beforehand a way to indicate if they are reaching their limit during an activity and need some time out or to stop. This could be a word or a hand signal.

For younger children or those with communication difficulties it is important to keep an eye out for signs they are getting heightened and consider bringing things to an end before this increases.

SET EVERYONE'S EXPECTATIONS

All families have their own traditions and ways of doing things and for many families with children with additional needs they feel a huge pressure from extended family to keep this up. Having a Christmas that suits the needs of your child can often look very different to what people expect, so it can be helpful to decide how your Christmas will be and explain to people in advance how you plan on doing things this year. You might even find it helpful to share this guide with them.

Parent tip!

We time-limit Christmas gatherings, so we don't have large gatherings that go on endlessly. It takes up huge amount of their "battery" in dealing with many people in social situations. It's easy to get carried away thinking many plans are fun, but it sometimes isn't as fun for them! ~Tracy



BEFORE THE BIG DAY



PREPARATION

VISUAL REMINDER

Using a visual way to help your child or young person understand the plans and expectations can help ease anxieties they may have, such as not knowing what time Great Auntie Jean is going to leave, or if someone is going to force them to try a Brussels sprout! With older children and young people a verbal discussion may be enough, but writing things down can act as a concrete reminder that they can refer back to.

Visual strategies could include:

- having a calendar or planner so they know what events are happening each day
- breaking things down on a daily plan so they know when things start and finish and what comes after (this could be familiar visuals with pictures or symbols, or simply a written list on a scrap of paper or phone)
- looking at photos from previous Christmases and talking about what they enjoyed to help trigger emotional memory

A PLAN FOR THE DAY

Help your child to understand how Christmas Day (or any celebration days) will run - what order will things happen and who will be there. Visuals can be helpful. This can be especially important if timings of things will be very different, e.g. meal or bed times. Talk about what you are all looking forward to and if there is anything they are worried about.



Parent tip: A Time to Play

We explain to the kids before Christmas Day that we have less play time on Christmas Day. There will be some gaming but less than we would like because of dinner. But we make Boxing Day games day and we set the table up with lots of things to play. ~Rosalie



DECK THE HALLS



Putting up decorations is often the first step of celebrating Christmas for many people. It can be a lovely family activity that many people look forward to, to get them in the spirit. Below are some things to consider when it comes to decorations.

A START AND END DATE

Let your child know when the decorations will be going up but also when they will be coming down.

USE PHOTOGRAPHS

Take a photo of the room without decorations so that can you show them what it will go back to. Look at photos of last year's decorations if you have them to help prepare (make sure to take some of just the room this year to use next year!). If you are visiting other people's houses, ask them to send you a photo of their decorated spaces so you can help your child be prepared that it will look different.

A LITTLE AT A TIME - OR ALL AT ONCE

Consider how quickly you put up your decorations. For some putting up and taking down decorations gradually could be less overwhelming, for example putting up the tree without lights or baubles then slowly adding them over a period of time. For others they need everything done at once if they find it easier to process the room switching to being in "Christmas mode".

SENSORY IMPACT OF DECORATIONS

Think carefully about any sensory differences your child may have. If your child is hyper-responsive to light or sound they could have sensory discomfort around decorations that have lights (particularly flashing), are shiny/reflective or make noise. Some decorations, particularly things such as real Christmas trees, can also change the smell of the room.

DO IT WHEN THEY ARE AT HOME

Some children may want to help, others may just like being in the room, some may not want to be involved at all. But putting the decorations up when they are home so they can see them go up or are aware it is happening can be less of a change than coming home to your home looking different.



Parent tip!

So we did not miss out on family events, we spoke to our family and we created a room where our child could retire to when they needed space and quiet. They could have their tech and any sensory things they needed to relax. ~Jackie

DECK THE HALLS



DECORATIONS

DECORATION FREE ZONE

Consider which rooms you decorate and make sure to keep some decoration free zones, so that there are rooms that look and feel familiar. You may want to create a "chill out" space somewhere in your house particularly on Christmas Day so that your child can go there to decompress and regulate throughout the day. This could have comfort and sensory items.



Parent Tip!

My son does not like the faces of pictures / ornaments looking at him so we try to limit decorations with them and when he is spending time in the lounge with us we allow him to turn them round and face the wall. It makes him more comfortable and we get to spend time with him.

~Chris



PRESENTS GALORE!



Gifts are a lovely way for friends and family to show that they care and can bring a huge amount of joy to both the person receiving the gift and the person giving it. However the surprise element of wrapped presents and the social expectations on the person receiving the gift can sometimes cause unnecessary upset or stress for all. Here are some ideas to take the panic out of presents:

A BOX OF UNCERTAINTY, WRAPPED UP WITH A BOW

A wrapped gift represents a huge amount of uncertainty, even if you can guess what it might be from the shape and size, you can't tell if it is going to be the "right one". For many children and young people, particularly those who are autistic, this can create a lot of anxiety. Ways around this could include:

- Presents being given unwrapped
- The tag being a photograph of the gift inside
- Presents being given in an open gift bag so they can see inside



KEEP TO THE LIST

Create a list of items your child would like and ask that family/friends stick to it and let you know what they have bought. If your child finds it difficult to think of what they would like, or are unable to communicate this, try to get in the habit of taking photos of things they point out or engage with throughout the year. You could also get them to choose from a limited list of items using pictures or catalogue cut outs.

Parent Tip: Outside the box

We ask family members to open the item beforehand to make sure they are the same colour as the one on the box. If the box picture is a blue car and it's a red car inside it confuses then upsets my child so in that instance we ask them to just ask to wrap it up without the box. ~Heather

PRESENTS GALORE!



Parent tip: Sensory Sounds



We also are very careful about wrapping paper in our own house, because he is very sensitive to the sound of ripping/rustling paper. I won't wrap his presents in paper, but will use fabric or thicker bags. ~Anna

WHERE, WHEN, HOW MANY?

The time people open presents can be quite a set tradition, but think what works best for your child. Would they prefer to do it straight away or is there something in your day that will interfere with them being able to play/use the item which may mean it is better to wait to open it after.

Consider the amount of presents that are given at the same time. For some children they may prefer to open a few at a time spread out over the day or week, whereas others may prefer to know they have opened all their presents at once and there are no more "waiting". It can also be a lot of pressure to open the gifts in front of people, particularly the person who gave it. Perhaps instead send family photos or videos of your child using the gift.

READY TO GO

It can be helpful to prepare the item beforehand to make sure it is ready to be used as soon as your child is given it. Check it has batteries in if needed, that everything is put together or removed from excessive/fiddly packaging.

Parent tip: A Plan B





My daughter would not want to upset anyone, so where it was not possible to know what was coming, we'd practice saying "thank you very much for your present, it's really lovely". We have an understanding that if it was not right for her, we'd exchange it for something else after Christmas – we even had a secret sign so she could let me know how she was feeling. ~Maryanne





FOOD FOR THOUGHT



FAMILIAR FOOD

For many families allowing their child to eat something that is familiar instead of insisting that they have a festive roast, can really change the dynamics of Christmas Dinner. If you are eating at a family member's home it can be helpful to take food for your child's dinner with you or things they can snack on throughout the day.



Parent tip:

We don't make my son eat a roast dinner as he doesn't like the textures. He has pizza on Christmas day! We even make it festive by cutting into a Santa hat shape ~Heather

SERVICE

If your child is going to have the traditional Christmas Dinner, it can be helpful to consider if it would be better to present them with everything already on their plate, or if trying a "help yourself" style dinner may work better. This is where the food is placed in the middle in separate dishes and everyone can have as much or little of what they like, or even as a canteen buffet style in the kitchen to save room on the table.

SNAP, CRACKLE AND POP!

Christmas dinner can often be a noisy affair with people talking or laughing, perhaps some festive music playing and also loud/sudden sounds that can cause sensory distress such as crackers snapping or corks popping. Consider the effect this may have on your child. Are there any elements that could be missed or adapted, or is there a way to lessen the noise for them such as ear defenders or plugs.



Parent tip:

We all use bamboo wooden cutlery at Christmas dinner. That makes it possible for our boy to join meals, as he would otherwise not because of the noise that metal makes on crockery ~Manon



PLATE SEPARATORS

Roast dinners can often have lots of elements that end up mixed together or touching on your plate. You can find traditional looking plates with separate sections or even silicone plate dividers that can go on any plate. Ask that sauces or gravy are not added to begin with as they can spread quickly.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



A DIFFERENT DINNER

Christmas Dinner is quite often very different from our normal weekly meals. It may be earlier in the day, tends to be a lot longer, the TV is firmly off and often there is more pressure on children and young people to stay sat down. Decide if there are any aspects that you can keep the same as your normal meals, or is there a way you can adapt or ease some of the expectations for your child. It might also help to prepare your child for any of these differences.



FESTIVE FOOD GAMES OR MESSY PLAY

Christmas can be a great opportunity to introduce new foods through play or games, incorporating new food items for all the family to try. Our top tip with any kind of food based games, is don't do them at meal times, and ensure there is absolutely no pressure to eat it. If doing a "taste trial" cut the food into tiny pieces, and start with touching the food, you can then build up to each step if the child feels comfortable. Next step is smelling, then licking, then just placing it in the mouth but not swallowing (have tissues on hand to spit it out into), and finally eating. Using food in messy or sensory play can also be a great way to start as it completely removes the pressure to eat something, but make sure to give lots of positive reinforcement if they smell or taste items.

You can find a sensory song and festive messy play ideas on the next page!

FESTIVE MESSY PLAY



WINTER WONDERLAND - SENSORY TUB

NON-EDIBLE .VS. TASTE SAFE .VS. EDIBLE

Non-edible: these items are not safe to be consumed and should only be used if your child will not put them in their mouth.

Taste Safe: For children who may put items, or their hands, into their mouth whilst exploring. These are food items but are unlikely to taste nice or be enjoyable to eat on their own, but are not unsafe if consumed or tasted. We do not suggest encouraging a child to eat any of these items.

Edible: Food items, these are fine if eaten and can be a great way to start exploring new foods.

GETTING SET-UP

Grab any kind of container - this could be a roasting tray or plastic tray/box. Make sure to give it a clean first, particularly if your child is likely to put things in their mouth. You can also line this with a silicone sheet, tin foil or cling film.

The aim is to create a snowy scene with snow, a frozen pond and some trees. You can then incorporate things such as animals or figures, or play "finding" games.



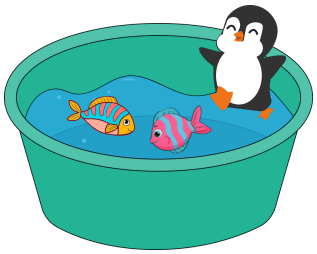
FESTIVE MESSY PLAY

SNOW

Non-edible	Taste Safe	Edible
· Shaving Foam · Hair Mousse · Whipped egg whites · Store bought “fake snow” · Shredded or scrunched paper · Pom poms	· Cornflour or flour · Oobleck (cornflour mixed with water) · Whipped aquafaba (liquid canned chickpeas come in) · Porridge oats · Rice	· Baby Rice - add a couple of tablespoons of melted coconut oil, mix and allow to cool, this will give some texture and make the mixture stick together to make balls or snow men! · Vanilla ice-cream · Spray cream · Marshmallows (if using mini-marshmallows consider choking risk depending on child’s age) · Any white sugar - granulated, caster or icing · Desiccated coconut · Rice Pudding

FROZEN POND

In a small bowl or tub freeze some water - you could add blue food dye and maybe some items like toy fish or penguins into the water. If you don’t allow the water to freeze solid your child can break the surface ice with a toy beater to “free the fish” or for solid ice you can drip warm water on to melt the ice.





TREES & FIGURES

Stalks of herbs like rosemary or thyme, or toy trees/bottle brush trees. If making everything in the tray taste-safe or edible, you can use chocolate/biscuit animals or Father Christmases / gingerbread men.

EXPLORING

Once your tub is set up, your child can explore the textures with their hands, or use different tools like spoons or scoops.

FINDING GAMES

Help Father Christmas find the “presents” that are buried in the show - this could be things such as chocolate coins or letters which could spell out a Christmas themed word or their name. You could laminate Christmas pictures (or cover both sides with cellotape) to bury if you want to keep the “snow” shallow. You can include toys such as people or animals for general play.



FESTIVE MESSY PLAY

WINTER WONDERLAND - SENSORY TUB



Important Information:

This is a starting point for your own winter wonderland, sensory tub ideas.

Please think carefully about the smells, tastes or textures that your child can tolerate. Consider allergens contained in any items and ensure that your child is supervised by an adult at all times whilst exploring the sensory tub.



Here's an example of how yours could look:



12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS
(REIMAGINED)



SENSORY SONG

Using the tune from the original song, sing a line at a time, and enjoy the sensory action to go with it.

You can either start on the First Day of Christmas and add each day like the traditional way to sing the song or just go through all twelve to make a the activity shorter.

"ON THE TWELFTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS, MY BEST FRIEND SENT TO ME...



Twelve crackers snapping



Eleven mince pies baking



Ten fairies twirling



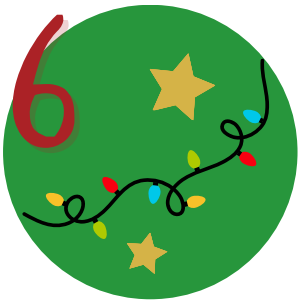
Nine reindeer prancing



Eight elves a-wrapping



Seven bells a-ringing



Six lights a-shining



FIVE GOLD STARS



Four candy canes



Three snow balls



Two fluffy gloves



And a present under my tree!



12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

(REIMAGINED)



SENSORY SONG

Find some examples below of physical/visual representations for each day:

"ON THE TWELFTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS, MY BEST FRIEND SENT TO ME...

- **Twelve crackers snapping** - pull a cracker! click your fingers, bang on a drum or hard surface or say SNAP / BANG / POP)
- **Eleven mince pies baking** - smell or taste a small piece of mince pie or use a hairdryer to gently blow warm air as if from an oven – you could swap this line for any two syllable food item – e.g. cookies / cupcakes / biscuits / puddings etc – you could also find Christmas spice scented candles or oils to smell)
- **Ten fairies twirling** - twirl ribbon or shimmery paper, or sprinkle chunky glitter)
- **Nine reindeer prancing** - stroke faux "reindeer" fur, or for Rudolph's nose shine a torch through something red and transparent – quality street wrappers are perfect, or make reindeer hooves sounds by tapping sticks, wooden spoons or coconut shells!)
- **Eight elves a-wrapping** - crunch wrapping paper, or any colourful paper)
- **Seven bells a-ringing** - shake or ring bells, if you don't have any you could play the sound of bells ringing from videos online)
- **Six lights a-shining** - make the room darker and put on fairy lights / or some kind of light toy/stick)
- **Five gold stars** - move shiny gold card stars or open and close hands)
- **Four candy canes** - smell candy canes or peppermint essence on a tissue/fabric)
- **Three snow balls** - squeeze white pom poms or fake snow, or real snow if there is some!)
- **Two fluffy gloves** - stroke child's hands with some soft gloves on)
- **And a present under my tree!** - wrap up a small box with something inside so that it rattles when you shake it)"

CHRISTMAS COMMUNICATION



BRAILLE, BSL & MAKATON

BRAILLE

The RNIB have produced a "Christmas Joy Makers Guide" full of fun festive activities for families with a blind or partially sighted child or young person. https://media.rnib.org.uk/documents/The_Joy_Makers_Guide_to_Christmas.pdf



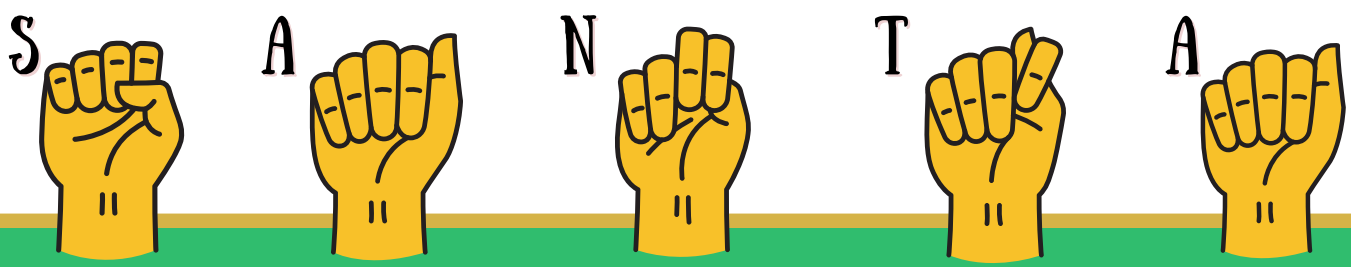
Why not try making a multi-sensory or braille Christmas card?

Consider decorating the card with craft items of different textures, small bells and scented marker pens. If the person receiving the card reads braille, you can incorporate this by writing out your message in braille using raised dot stickers or dots of puffy paints.
You can find the Braille Alphabet on the RNIB website:
https://media.rnib.org.uk/documents/ks1_braille_alphabet.pdf

BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE

You can find a variety of online Christmas resources, vocabulary and stories signed in British Sign Language.

- Let's Sign: https://letssign.co.uk/?s=Christmas&post_type=product
- Twinkl Christmas BSL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co2xQBQnO5E
- Commanding Hands Christmas Vocabulary: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNuvtfkdMIA
- Signed Stories; Raymond Biggs The Snowman: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVTAPJvS28E



CHRISTMAS COMMUNICATION



BRAILLE, BSL AND MAKATON

MAKATON

The Makaton Charity have a bank of Christmas resources with Makaton signs and symbols. To access these you need to sign up to their free resource library at:

https://makaton.org/TMC/TMC/Free_resources_.aspx?hkey=195b178e-78f1-4757-94a2-326a83afd84f

Make sure to follow Essex based Debby Makaton Tutor on Facebook for videos, resources and details of training: https://www.facebook.com/DebbyMakatonTutor



EXTRA SUPPORT



If you need advice, information or support over the holidays please see below for a couple of national helplines open on selected days over the festive period. You can also find details of other helplines on our resource page or directory.

Contact

The Contact national helpline number is 0808 808 3555.

Please check their website for opening times.

Family Lives

The Family Lives national helpline is 0808 800 2222.

Please check their website for opening times.



THE END

Contact Us

Visit our website
snapcharity.org

Contact our helpline
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Email us
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