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Community Network  
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## **Preparing for Christmas - Living with a Neurodevelopmental condition**

Christmas can and should be an exciting and fun time for all. For a child or young person with a Neurodevelopmental condition such as Autism, ADHD, Sensory Processing difficulties or associated conditions, however, it may be a time of confusion, anxiety, and distress which can leave the whole family stressed and family members upset and exhausted.

Preparing for any holiday activities for families living with a Neurodevelopmental condition can be extremely challenging, but Christmas can be more challenging than most. Children and young people with Autism have a strong need for routine, so it is important that you try your best as a family to keep to a daily routine as much as possible, this includes Christmas Eve and Christmas day.

Those children with a sensory difficulty may find the new smells, hustle and bustle and lights too overwhelming. It is important to think about providing them with some quiet time with a favourite activity in a Christmas-free zone at key moments that may be stressful.

You can incorporate a Christmas activity that they enjoy into their daily routine weeks before, such as opening the advent calendar, or switching on the tree lights. This will ensure that they are more comfortable as the big day arrives.

It might be useful to buy a DVD about Christmas to help familiarize your child with all that is going to happen around Christmas time, one that shows Father Christmas, decorated homes, families getting together to eat and opening presents on Christmas morning. Choose an animation film if possible.

Decorating the house all at once might create some anxiety so try to decorate gradually adding a bit at a time so they get used to the change in their environment, let them help with the decorating so they feel in control.

You may want to take your child Christmas shopping to buy gifts. This will allow them to get familiar with Christmas and the buying of gifts. If they don't want to go, that's OK, they may experience a sensory overload when shopping in crowded shops. If this is the case, keep them away from places that are too stressful. Give them a visual list to help them look for the presents they are going to buy.

Having lots of presents to open on the day could be overwhelming. It might be best to agree on a limit to the number of presents they receive, e.g. one from mum and dad and one from grandparents. Other family members could perhaps give money or purchase a gift as a group. Also, introduce presents one by one, instead of all at once and don't get upset if they don't appear as interested or as excited as you think they should be. They will become interested when they feel more comfortable.

You might want to leave their presents unwrapped unless they like the sensation of unwrapping.

Every child is different, so what works for one might not work for the other. As their parent, remember, you know your child best!