



## Social Incites™: Stress-Free Holidays? © 2006 Laurel A. Falvo

In many households and classrooms, the holidays are a time of busy schedules, unusual activities and foods, and increased sensory stimuli. For some individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), this is a recipe for discomfort and/or disaster. While some of this cannot be avoided, there are things that parents and teachers can do to help make the holidays more enjoyable—or bearable—for those with ASD. Here are just a few ideas:

**Evaluate the Schedule**—As a mom and former teacher, I know about the pressure to pack as much in as possible during the last few weeks of the year. Special projects, school programs, making or purchasing gifts, baking special foods, and visiting with friends and family all compete for a place on the calendar. This may happen at the expense of our own perceived sanity, as well as the comfort of our children.

1. Can something be removed from the schedule? This may require saying, “no” to a social engagement, purchasing a gift instead of making it (or the other way around, depending on what is less stressful for you and your family!), or working with friends and family to share baked goods instead of making all of them yourself.
2. Can the individual with ASD be better informed about the schedule? A visual may be helpful for them to anticipate the upcoming activities. This might take the form of a calendar, poster, or “advent calendar” counting down to Christmas or some other special event. (Advent calendars are commercially available. You can also make a paper chain with the correct number of links, having the individual remove a link each day until the special day arrives). For transitions, special events, travels, or a change in schedule, the use of a Social Story™ might be helpful.
3. What will stay the same? Often it is comforting for people to know what will NOT be changing during a busy or stressful time. This sometimes helps to keep the changes and transitions in perspective.

**Evaluate the Sensory Environment**—Most environments (neighborhoods, homes, malls, schools, etc.) take on an increased level of sensory stimuli during the holidays. Lights, music, decorations, and baked or cooked treats all add to the visual, auditory, olfactory, and other sensory input. This can be overwhelming to those who struggle even on a “normal” day to process and make sense of the sensory bombardment.

1. Can something be removed? If there’s lighting, music, or some other stimulus that’s particularly disturbing to the individual, can it be removed or used only at specific, predictable times? When they were young, my own children never appreciated the motion-activated “talking Santas” and other figures that danced and sang when they walked past. I made sure that we avoided those aisles in the store, or that they were turned off when we visited people who had them. Over time, I gave the kids opportunities to get acquainted with those items during calm times so that they were no longer afraid.
2. Be sure to provide a quiet, predictable “place away” for those likely to feel overwhelmed by the sensory environment. It should include things that are comforting to the individual—special music, a favorite toy or other item, a comfortable blanket or pillow, etc. You might even be able to work with the individual to set up this special place, and/or to schedule “down times” when it will be used (although if at all possible, it should always be accessible as needed). Some individuals may benefit from having a set of headphones available to use when noise becomes overwhelming to them.
3. Consider whether a “sensory diet” might be helpful for a particular individual. Sometimes heavy lifting (toting a gallon of milk or pulling a wagon), movement activities (jumping or swinging), and other techniques may be helpful. Your local occupational therapist might be able to provide personal suggestions for the individual with whom you live or work.

**Consider Dietary Factors**—Parties and family gatherings provide numerous opportunities to try new, delicious foods. However, this may be upsetting to some individuals, or may create intestinal or behavioral problems for others when they eat unfamiliar foods. Some should be avoiding these treats due to food intolerances, sensitivities, or allergies. It is helpful if teachers communicate with parents about upcoming food parties, so that parents can substitute foods as needed. If attending parties, the individual can eat acceptable or comforting foods ahead of time so they are not as tempted by the foods at the party (or a parent can pack foods to take along—something I did often over the years when my kids were on a gluten-free and casein-free diet).

**Other Practical Suggestions**—Don’t forget to schedule “down time” for enjoying favorite activities and for sleeping. When we’re tired, we typically have a harder time dealing with sensory and scheduling stressors. It’s also important to factor in physical activity. Walking, jogging, or other forms of exercise or movement are also an important component during the holidays.

Wishing you all an enjoyable, relatively “stress-free” holiday season!

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