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**GIVING BACK
AUTISM AND
HOLIDAY
STRESS**

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Family
GIFT GUIDE



Autism & Reducing Holiday Stress

BY ANGELA WEST, MS, BCBA, LBA

The holiday season brings the promise of joyous gatherings and shared celebrations. Yet, for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their loved ones, it often comes with unique challenges to navigate, from sensory sensitivities to difficulties with social interactions. But the holidays also offer an opportunity to create a supportive, inclusive environment that caters to the needs of children with ASD, turning potential stress into shared joy.

Here's how parents of children with autism and family and friends hosting holiday gatherings can best prepare.

For Parents:

Preparation is a crucial ingredient for holiday success. The holidays come with a change in routine. To ease this transition, use a visual calendar to count down the days to a particular event. Visualization can provide structure and reduce anxiety related to the unknown. Try to familiarize your child with what to expect in the weeks leading up to the festivities. This could mean listening to holiday music, watching movies or reading books highlighting holiday traditions. You might also include a brief visit to a relative's house a week before a family gathering. Knowledge is empowering and can help mitigate anxiety.

Role-playing can prepare your child for specific social interactions they may encounter. You may demonstrate greeting relatives or a gift exchange. Practicing these in a familiar environment can build confidence, ease nervousness and prepare children emotionally and mentally for the interactions they may likely have.

Communication with relatives or hosts is also a critical component. Prior discussions can prevent uncomfortable situations or misunderstandings. Visit the host's home to discuss details and check for potential safety risks, especially if your child tends to wander. Additionally, identifying a quiet space where your child can retreat if the sensory experiences become too intense is always a good idea.

When the big day comes, pack a "comfort kit," including sensory toys, comforting objects and favorite snacks. You know

your child best—bring items to help soothe them if they feel overwhelmed.

For Hosting Families:

If you're hosting a child with autism, a little understanding and flexibility can go a long way. Sensory overload is a common concern, so consider modifying the environment to be sensory-friendly by turning down bright lights and keeping the music volume moderate. Communicate with the child's parents and ask what you can do to help provide a comforting environment, including ensuring you have something appropriate and enjoyable for the child to eat.

Discussing plans and schedules with the child's parents in advance is vital to providing a fun and stress-free gathering. Parents can offer insight into inclusive activities their child can participate in and enjoy. As

for gifts, consult the parents for suggestions, especially if you're unsure of the child's sensory preferences or needs.

Open dialogue between parents and hosts is a game-changer. Parents should feel empowered to share what works for their child and what could trigger stress. Likewise, hosts should feel comfortable asking questions to ensure they can provide a pleasant experience for everyone involved.

The holiday season is all about togetherness, understanding and creating memorable experiences. By combining preparation with empathy and compassion, families and hosts can create an environment where everyone can enjoy their time together. Children affected by autism, like any other child, deserve to enjoy the magic of the season. With these strategies, parents and hosts can ensure everyone has a joyful, inclusive and stress-free holiday. ■



Angela West, M.S., BCBA, LBA, founder and chief clinical officer of Behavioral Framework, is board-certified and licensed as a behavior analyst in Virginia and Maryland. With over 15 years of mental health and ABA experience, West has diverse programming and behavior management knowledge.

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