How to keep the holidays merry and bright

40 SUPER GIFTS
That avoid sensory overload

Stress-free FAMILY FUN
Coping strategies that work

MAKING HOLIDAY TREATS!
• GLUTEN-FREE
• CASEIN-FREE
• ASD SAFE
Whatever your holiday traditions are, advance planning is key to making them memorable...

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

Whatever you celebrate, wherever you live, one thing’s for sure: the holiday season is upon us, which means countless parties, presents, and potentially disastrous situations, especially if you’re caring for a child on the autism spectrum. Along with barrels of joy and cheer, this time of year can be terribly stressful—the pressure to decorate the house, buy sufficient gifts for all the right people, and attend event after endless social event.

Throw into the mix the daily stressors of autism, and it’s the perfect storm for an emotional crisis, for child and parent alike. But as with other challenging circumstances, the frenetic pace of the holiday season can be managed—and even enjoyed—with just a little bit of forethought, and a whole lot of love.

SENSORY STRESSORS

The holidays are about nothing if not sensation: smell, sight, hearing, touch, taste. What is stimulating in a warm and fuzzy way for most of us can be torturous to children with autism. The website Parent Coaching for Autism offers some wonderful ways of dealing with these various sensitivities, like carrying a pair of sunglasses around if your child is disturbed by light, whether from decorations or the brightness and bustle of a busy department store. Similarly, keep earplugs on hand for those kids on the spectrum who are startled or thrown off by loud or sudden noises.

The site also offers tips for how you can avoid a meltdown when an unfamiliar family member—or even a well-known grandparent—tries to hug your child. Though the gesture is meant to show affection, it’s not for all ASD children. Warn relatives in advance of your child’s potential discomfort, or nip it in the bud by teaching your child to stick out his or her arm for a handshake. Not only does this send the intended signal, it also allows your child to feel a sense of control over the situation.

Prepare your child for new faces by looking through pictures of family and friends prior to attending a party or gathering. Explain who each person is, how they are related, and a fun fact that might help the information stick. Go over the guest roster in the days leading up to the event to reinforce the facts so your child will feel more comfortable among people who may be strangers.

MELTDOWN MANAGEMENT

Don’t hesitate to let friends and family members know about your child’s special dietary needs in advance, or to bring your own food with you to a party. Nobody will be insulted when they discover that avoiding gluten or casein products will keep your ASD child feeling good, and behaving accordingly.

But should that dreaded moment arrive—yes, I’m talking about the tantrum or whatever action indicates your child...
has had enough—make sure there is a quiet room where your child can take a brief “time out” from the holiday cheer. Spending copious amounts of time surrounded by family can unnerve the most even-keeled person, to say nothing of how it can affect a child with autism. In their Twelve Tips for getting through the holiday season, The Autism Society recommends not only securing a peaceful space, but also using this as an opportunity to teach your child how to excuse himself from the group, a self-management tool that will serve him well as he gets older.

If your child does not function at that level, decide in advance on a cue or a word that signals they’d like to retreat to a calmer location. And if your child can’t make this known to you any other way than by acting out, remove him from the anxiety-inducing situation immediately, and into a more soothing environment. The Autism Society also suggests this separate space include soft music, low lights, and a bed or chair for your child to relax in.

**STICK TO THE SCHEDULE**

For many people, the holiday season is rife with tradition, and every family has their own special way of doing things. As children with autism tend to be bastions of routine, this special time of year may be initially off-putting to them, as it upsets the daily flow to which they have grown accustomed. Try to stick to the same sleeping and eating schedule as during a school day, and make new or different activities—such as ice skating, or shopping for gifts—seem exciting, and encourage other kids in the family to do the same.

Also, keep your family’s holiday-time activities consistent year-to-year, whenever possible. Your child will know what food and seating arrangement to expect at Aunt Barbara’s house, and may remember that after dinner is a mountain of perfectly stacked gifts, breathlessly tearing wrapping paper off to the majority of children may delight in this magical time of year. There truly is no one-size-fits-all operation. While the majority of children may delight in breathlessly tearing wrapping paper off a mountain of perfectly stacked gifts, the same is not always so of kids with autism. They may become captivated by a colorful, busy print on the paper, and never actually make it to the gift inside. Leave as little a barrier as possible between the child and the gift, so that it is presented simply and they won’t become frustrated by complicated packaging.

**Christmas Cast Iron Cowboy Terrine**

**BY IMUS RANCH**

1 zucchini grated
1 red bell pepper chopped
1 red chili pepper chopped
1 yellow onion chopped
1 cup grated organic cheddar
5 organic eggs
1/2 cup unsweetened coconut milk
3 tbsp. chopped fresh herbs: basil, rosemary, oregano
1/2 tsp. turmeric powder
sea salt and pepper to taste

1. Preheat oven to 375°
2. Sauté veggies in organic extra virgin cold pressed olive oil for 10 minutes
3. In a large bowl, beat eggs and milk; add cheese and herbs, add cooked veggies and salt and pepper to taste.
4. Pour into cast iron pan and put in oven; cook for about 1 hour.

Serve in the cast iron pan but be careful as the pan will be very hot.

**MAKING THE MOST OF IT**

As for the gifts themselves, the website MyAutismTeam, a social network for caretakers of children with autism, recently surveyed users on what the best presents are for kids on the autism spectrum. Suggestions included interactive educational DVDs and games, which help children learn and keep them entertained; books featuring repetition and rhyming for younger kids, and books centering on specific subjects (like science) for older children; and gifts that appeal to the senses, like stuffed animals or a toy with lights on it, depending on your child’s preferences.

Puzzles and Legos were other popular gifts among MyAutismTeam users, for their tactile and colorful qualities. But one of the most meaningful ideas for what you can give all of your children this holiday season is not tangible, or flashy, or particularly expensive. It’s the gift of everybody clearing their hectic schedules to make sure the family spends quality time together…...