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Planning for the Holidays *with Your Special Needs Child*

By Dr. Scott L. Barkin

7he holidays can be fun but also extremely stressful, especially for families who have children with special needs. Certain foods, specific schedules, new people and places, crowds and new experiences can result in wonderful memories or could trigger a meltdown. Parents and caregivers who have a child with special needs know that when it comes to a hectic time such as the holiday season, preparation and planning can help assure happy and memorable moments for all.

When looking ahead to the holiday season, take some time to reflect on past experiences—think about what has worked and what has not, and why. Consider these tips to help you manage and enjoy the holidays:

- **Consider your goals.** Keep your goals realistic and attainable. The reminder to parents of typically developing children as well as special needs children is often the same; our families are not perfect all year so don't set an expectation of perfection for this holiday. Although it may sound trite it is nevertheless true, the quality of time shared is more valuable than the quantity of time.
- **Educate family members about your child's disability.** Share your goals with family and friends before the visit. Open up a dialogue with your family regarding what their expectations and concerns might be and share yours. This will allow for an opportunity to explore legitimate concerns and discuss options as well to dispel unnecessary concerns.
- **Prepare your child for guests.** If you're expecting guests who are unfamiliar to your child, consider sharing photos and videos of who will be visiting, which will foster a sense of familiarity. It's helpful to talk about the people who are visiting and tell anecdotal stories about your experiences with them to create a sense of comfort.
- **If you're traveling, plan ahead.** Know what accommodations are essential to your traveling as well as which might contribute to a successful trip. Make phone calls to confirm that identified accommodations are available for you on the schedule you are planning. Many of the most popular family resort destinations have wonderful accommodations for families with special needs, however, the availability can be limited. Consider what strategies can be employed if long waits occur (dvd players, mp3 players, favored toys, snacks, etc.)



- **Set a reasonable limit on the length of visits.**

Share with everyone that you will be arriving early and departing early or arriving late and leaving early, or anticipate leaving before dessert or will be arriving for dessert. If things are going well, then you can stay longer. The key here is having a plan and sharing it.

- **Hold as many variables constant as possible.**

Consider the crucial objects, schedule, routines and/or clothes that make a difference to your child and do your best to incorporate them. Familiar foods, a

consistent schedule, and preferred articles of clothing all contribute to your child's successful transition. If your child has limited food preferences, cater to them. This visit may not be the time to experiment with an audience.

- **Determine where quieter areas can be found early on.** If you are hosting, preserve a quiet area to escape to. If the visit becomes overwhelming, you can go there to regroup.

- **Pre-determine a supervision schedule.** Share the responsibilities if you can. If you don't have a spouse that can pitch in, maybe there is a friend, therapist, or respite worker that might be able to accompany you.

- **Take the initiative to focus on new opportunities.**

Don't be anchored to old traditions that may not work given the current variables. Consider what new traditions can be created and fostered in years to come. The key here is for everyone to be open, creative and focused on the priority of people who care about each other being together.

- **It's important to emphasize the positive elements of the holiday.** Perhaps you can help your family and friends stay connected to your child by sending a photo with a note thanking each guest for helping to make the holiday a special and memorable occasion for you and your child.

After the holiday celebrations are over, review what went well and what did not and consider why. Put these notes in a safe place and review them the next time you plan a gathering, to help assure more fun times ahead. •

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