



**Options Group**  
*making a difference*



## Christmas - No Surprises Please!

### Introduction

If asked what we like about Christmas many of us would reply with “the surprise presents”, “the many different foods”, “not having to engage in normal daily living routines”, “socialising” and “meeting different people”.

These are the things that make Christmas so special. For the individual with autism these are the very factors that make Christmas so difficult and a time to get through as quickly as possible. I recently asked a friend with Asperger’s Syndrome what we could do to make Christmas a better experience for him. Without smiling, he replied “cancel the b\*\*\*\*y thing”. In this issue we look at a number of practical strategies for making Christmas a more enjoyable and less stressful time for all involved.



### 1. The Countdown To Christmas

It seems that Christmas starts earlier and earlier each year. This year I saw decorations on sale in August. This can make it very difficult for the individual with autism who often struggles with the concept of time and deferment of gratification, to wait for presents and the actual day to arrive.

Using a variation of the traditional advent calendar can be a good way of helping the individual understand that Christmas is coming.

Some parents have used their child’s special interest for example, Thomas’s journey towards Christmas. This consists of a cut out Thomas the Tank Engine that moves towards Christmas a station at a time (each station represents a day or a week). The calendar or method chosen needs to reflect an individual’s level of understanding.

Other parents try to play down the coming of Christmas and keep it a secret for as long as possible. Obviously this is easier said than done. They could try to set Christmas within a time frame, for example we start preparing for Christmas when we put the tree up or after some other significant event. It is equally important to have a set time when Christmas is over.

### 2. No Surprises Please

Whilst some individuals with autism love surprises, others find them difficult to cope with and prefer to know exactly what they are getting for Christmas. One young man I talked to recently said he found it difficult to understand why anyone would want to buy him presents that he didn’t want or need. Also he said he found it impossible to pretend to like something that he did not. It is important to involve this young man in the selection of the present and the wrapping of it. Doing this reassures him that he will not be getting any unwanted items on Christmas day.

When choosing presents, parents often feel under pressure to buy items that they would buy for an individual without autism of a similar age, they also feel that they should spend significant amounts of money. For me it is about buying presents that will bring the maximum amount of pleasure to the child and will have meaning for them. If this means buying unusual objects or wrapping up different types of household bricks - it’s OK.

### 3. Maintaining Structures And Routines

A parent told me that one Christmas her son with autism came into the kitchen whilst she was putting the turkey into the oven. In an anxious and confused voice he asked her "mummy, why are we having turkey for breakfast? I want bacon".

It is easy to forget that even the little changes can cause misunderstanding and in some cases this will lead to difficult behaviour.

A parent from Lincoln told me that she has experienced many difficulties with her child due to the change in Christmas day routines. For her the solution was to cook the dinner a few weeks prior, freeze it and then on the big day all she had to do was defrost and cook it, enabling her to keep more closely to the normal routines. This strategy was successful in reducing the difficulties.

If the individual normally needs a supportive schedule, don't forget that they will require it over the Christmas period and you will also need to ensure that you have the appropriate symbols or pictures available.



### 4. Giving The Opportunity To Opt Out At Social Gatherings

Christmas is often a time for family gatherings, meals out and other social events. All of these can be a source of stress and anxiety for the individual with autism. Levels of stress can often be managed by providing a safe place for them to retreat to when it all becomes too much. A favourite object can also be a life saver at such events.

Encouraging the individual to flick through an Argos catalogue can mean that they remain calm and you get to stay longer.

#### Final Comment

When I used to run a sibling support group, I asked them to talk about what was the best thing about having a brother or sister with autism. One seven year old boy said "Christmas is great! I get two lots of presents. First I have my own presents, and then I have my brother with autism's because he only wants the wrapping". I hope that this inspires us to always look for the positives over the Christmas period. I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas.

### Options Group's specialist services for children and adults with Autistic Spectrum Conditions

