

Holiday Gathering Checklist for Families of Children With Disabilities

BEFORE THE EVENT

✓ Review the Environment

- Ask the host about noise, lights, how many people will be there, pets, and layout.
- Check for accessibility: make sure entrances, seats, paths, restrooms are easy to use.

✓ Make a Backup Plan

- Find a quiet spot your child can go to if needed.
- Plan how to leave early if things get too hard.
- Decide who will help watch your child or help with transitions.

✓ Prepare Your Child

- Use social stories, pictures, or videos if available.
- Talk through or use visuals to describe what to expect (order of events, people attending, noises, smells).
- Practice greetings or activities.

✓ Communicate With the Host

- Share any food needs, safety concerns, how your child communicates, or things that bother your child.
- Ask for accommodations if needed (quiet space, seating location, food modifications).

✓ Pack a Comfort Kit

- Headphones to block noise
- Sensory tools (fidgets, weighted lap pad, chewies)
- Comfort items (blanket, toy)
- Snacks or familiar foods
- Medications, medical supplies, or communication devices

- Chargers or batteries
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DURING THE EVENT

✓ Help Your Child Know What's Next

- Review a simple schedule with your child.
- Provide countdowns before transitions or changes (like “5 more minutes before we eat”).

✓ Manage Sensory Needs

- Offer breaks before your child gets overwhelmed.
- Use headphones, sunglasses, or change seating arrangements.

✓ Let Your Child Participate in Their Own Way

- Choose activities your child enjoys.
- Change or adapt traditions so they can join in meaningfully.
- Give choices: “Do you want to help decorate, or do you want to watch instead?”

✓ Use Teamwork

- Take turns caring for your child with a partner or family member.
 - Let someone else help with siblings if needed.
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SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

✓ Prepare “Scripts” for Common Situations

For example:

- How to explain your child's needs
- How to respond to advice you didn't ask for
- How to set boundaries politely (“We're taking a quick break, we'll be back soon.”)

✓ Protect Emotional Energy

- Take breaks for yourself.

- Step outside or into a quiet room to reset or relax when needed.

✓ Focus on Connection, Not Perfection

- It's okay if plans change.
 - Celebrate small successes and moments of joy.
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ENDING THE EVENT

✓ Transition Gently

- Give a 10-minute warning before leaving.
- Use visuals or countdowns for smoother transitions to the car or bedtime.

✓Talk about the Event With Your Child

- Talk about what went well and what was hard.
- Celebrate their efforts and successes.

✓ Review as a Family

- What worked?
 - What should you change next time?
 - What will you choose to skip or make easier in the future?
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FINAL REMINDER

*Be willing to adjust your expectations for your child, your family, and yourself. The goal isn't to create the perfect holiday experience - it's to create **meaningful, manageable, and joyful moments** that honor your child's needs, build connections, and strengthen family bonds.*

