

Teacher Toolbox



Teacher Toolbox – November 2024

By Margaret Wood, Speech-Language Pathologist and TAP Consultant mwood@ces.org

Handling Holidays:

Successful Strategies for Staff and Students



Most of us look forward to the holiday season with excitement and anticipation of sweater weather, timeless traditions, fun with friends and family, and taking a welcomed break from our regular routine. However, the impending holidays and school breaks fill others with dread and anxiety. While some may be experiencing grief from previous holiday trauma, such as the death of a loved one or financial stressors with impending gift-giving, others may be dreading this time of year for very different reasons.

Many individuals thrive on structure and routine, such as those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). If you have spent any amount of time in a school setting during this time of year, you know that the weeks leading up to school breaks are filled with chaos and many disruptions to the daily routine. Keep in mind, this is also true in your students' homes. Many families' routines are also different this time of year, as they try to navigate holiday parties and other special events, which may be fun for some siblings and stress-inducing for others. Some parents may schedule their family vacations around these weeks, while other families stay closer to home and try to stay as close to routine as possible. The combination of these school and home changes tend to kick schedules to the curb, which invokes excitement for some and extreme stress for others.

For a person with autism, routine and consistency are key. However, this can be difficult to uphold when a natural breakdown of routine and structure occurs in the month leading up to winter break. School days are frequently filled with holiday projects, performances, and parties. Some of which are planned, while others are (not always pleasant) "surprises", which increases anxiety for students who thrive on following the same routine. We tend to rush around frantically, trying to squeeze in the necessary curriculum among the fun, yet frenzied, festivities, leading us to "hurry" our students to finish faster, frequently triggering the "fight, flight, freeze" center of students with ASD or other challenges. In addition, these students often experience moments of sensory over stimulation during this time, in response to what some of us consider enjoyable sounds, such as holiday music blaring, bells ringing, and students singing, shouting, and laughing.

Since anxiety is the root of challenging behaviors, heeding the adage "an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure", is an appropriate reminder to prepare for the upcoming hurried holiday happenings and school breaks accordingly. The hustle and bustle may be a natural part of the holidays, but individuals with ASD tend to perceive crowds differently than others. Keep in mind how your student has handled being in crowded and noisy settings in the past (e.g., the cafeteria, school assemblies, field trips, etc.). Planning, communication, and routine are the

cornerstones, which can help us plan ahead and minimize disruptions. It is important to ask yourself:

- What is usually the first sign that they are experiencing sensory overload?
- How will I manage a meltdown or shutdown if one occurs?

1. Choose Events Wisely

- Remember that all students do not have to participate in every activity to enjoy this season.
- Attending and watching from a distance is sometimes more comfortable and enjoyable for some students. Avoid cajoling or coercing a student to participate against their will.
- Consider attending events that may be engaging but not overwhelming, paying specific attention to the following:
 - Number and proximity of people/the crowd in a given location
 - Noise level, temperature, length, and complexity of the activity
 - When necessary, avoid specific locations and events that aren't worth the risk of distressing your student if you are aware of any specific sensory aversions or phobias (e.g., fingerpainting, tasting new foods, or meeting/interacting with "Santa").

2. Visual Schedules

- Attempt to maintain as many routines as possible (e.g., start of the school day, order of curriculum, snack/lunch, end of day, etc.).
- Continue to use the current visual schedule format that the student is already familiar with (e.g., removable Velcro daily schedule, first/then, checklist, or close the flap).
- Point out new activities in the schedule to your student the week and/or day before and throughout the day the activity before the activity will occur.
- Prepare a "Change of plans" or "Something different" icon for unexpected moments (e.g., assembly is cancelled, a special holiday snack is shared by classmates, inclement weather results in indoor recess, etc.).
- Create a "new routine" Task Analysis schedule, to break down the steps of a new task into smaller chunks to provide clear directions.



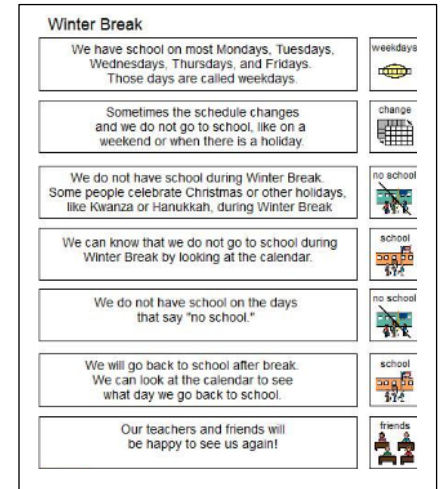
3. Sooth Sensory Systems

- Provide calming sensory items for students who might become overwhelmed by the new experiences they encounter in the schedule, such as:
 - Hand fidgets, stress balls, bubbles, etc. that may provide soothing distraction during moments of sensory overload
 - Noise-canceling headphones to muffle the excessive crowd noise
 - A festive brimmed hat or pair of shades can help to cut the glare of bright or blinking lights while helping the student feel like a part of the celebrations.
 - Have an exit strategy. Know the quickest ways to the exit and away from the crowds in case your student cannot tolerate the situation.
 - Keep the student's favorite snack on hand for moments when new foods are introduced, and food options are completely unfamiliar. Some students become stressed due to

texture and taste aversions, so we need to model flexibility by not insisting that they “just try it” during a class cooking activity or a holiday potluck party.

4. Support Social Situations

- Create social stories to familiarize your student with who and what to expect during an unfamiliar or infrequently occurring activity (e.g., school assemblies/performances, snow days, and the upcoming days off from school).
- A social story is a short story with pictures and simple text, which helps a student understand and prepare for a particular social situation.
- When possible, allow students to create the story together as a class, so everyone will benefit. Write the story in first person, from the students' perspectives.
- Print, read together daily, and send home for students to read again at home independently and/or with parents to prepare them for the upcoming activities and changes.
- Consider attending the next CES-TAP live virtual complimentary workshop **Autism Toolbox Series: School Social Supports** on Thursday November 7, 2024, for many more helpful tools to increase your students' social and communication functioning. See below for details!



In closing, to foster flexible thinking in our students, we must ourselves learn and model flexibility:

- ✓ Take a deep breath.
- ✓ Remind yourself that some things are outside of your control.
- ✓ Change your plan when needed.
- ✓ Accept the change with a happy heart.

No matter how dedicated we are to ensuring this season goes smoothly, there will be difficult moments. Acceptance of that fact is the first step to navigating the obstacles and handling the holidays. Not every moment is going to be picture-perfect and there are sure to be some bumps in the road. When the going gets tough, remember to **think flexibly** and apply these evidence-based tools from your **Autism Toolbox** to avoid meltdowns and mayhem (for both students AND staff)! Implementing the above strategies will foster calm composure for students and staff not only during this super busy season, but throughout the entire school year!

NEXT AUTISM TOOLBOX SERIES TOPIC!

Go to <https://www.ces.org/> to register!



Resources and References:

<https://acclaimautism.com/preparing-for-school-breaks-with-a-child-with-asd/>

<https://www.eccm.org/blog/preparing-children-with-autism-for-the-holiday-season>

<https://truthforteachers.com/7-teacher-tips-for-surviving-the-week-before-holiday-break/>