

'Tis the Season to be Sensory Smart

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The holidays are great for working on fine motor skills.

Perhaps you enjoy the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, but most children with sensory processing issues need extra guidance at this time of year. Between disruptions in everyday routines, crowded stores blasting holiday music, special foods, and demands for “best” behavior, holidays can be stressful for everyone. Happily, as a sensory smart parent, there is so much you can do to help.

Get Ready!

Kids who struggle with changes in daily routines do best when prepared in advance. Well before any special occasion, discuss what will happen before, during, and after the big day. For example, if you are going to Grandma’s house for Thanksgiving, you can review what to bring, what to wear, who will be there, and the general sequence of events. You can explain why we celebrate Thanksgiving using picture books if that helps. Mark off days on a calendar as the event approaches. By reducing unwelcome surprises, your child will be better able to predict what will happen next and be more empowered to organize his behavior.

During any school vacation, try to stick to a normal schedule like having the same bedtime and wake-up time each day so you don’t disrupt your child’s sleep-wake cycle. This is especially important for a child who tends to be a problem sleeper. If your child’s sleep schedule is disrupted, get it back on track by readjusting it bit-by-bit, making bedtime 10-15 minutes earlier each day.

The holidays are great for working on fine motor skills. Enter the name of the holiday into your computer browser to find holiday theme activities such as dot-to-dots, mazes, crossword puzzles and more. (For example, go to Google and enter “Hanukkah mazes” or

“Christmas coloring pages”). If your child needs handwriting practice, have her write place cards if it’s a big sit-down meal. This will also help your child anticipate who will sit next to her, and review what she might discuss during the meal.

Making holiday decorations, from pinecone turkeys to a Kwanzaa Kinara or a Menorah out of clay, can help your child feel more engaged in the celebration. You will find plenty of easy craft ideas in holiday season magazines, especially those geared toward kids.

If your child dislikes getting messy, use the tactile desensitization techniques your OT shows you so your child feels more comfortable touching “yucky” materials. If your child hates touching mushy wet textures, provide a long-handled paintbrush and vinyl gloves. If your child insists on washing hands every time he gets a speck of paint or glue on them, try to extend the experience before wash-up (let’s just paint this little part and *then* we’ll go wash up), or keep a damp sponge or paper towels nearby so your child can wipe off the mess without totally disengaging from the activity.

Cooking is also a wonderful sensory experience that lets your child participate in holiday preparation. Ask your child to help you write the shopping list and shop at the supermarket (when it’s not too busy) to find things on the shelves. At home, let your child help you pour, mix, blend, and decorate holiday food. Even if you’re going to someone else’s home to celebrate, you and your child can prepare a special side dish or dessert to bring along.

When gift shopping, shop when stores are less crowded or shop online. If you **MUST** take your child into busy stores, plan ahead and bring sensory comforts such as chewing gum and other oral comforts, earplugs or favorite music

with headphones, a baseball cap or visor to protect sensitive eyes from downcast lighting, and so on.

Finally, just because everyone plans to dress up for the holidays doesn't mean it's worth forcing your child into clothing that will make him miserable. Scratchy lace and bows on party dresses may be intolerable. Your son may be unable to handle a tie and dress shoes. But you never know, your child may love putting on a special outfit for a special occasion. Before the event, try on any new clothes and bring a change of clothing just in case. Or opt for clothing you know your child wears happily even if it's simply what he wears every day. As always, the key is to be flexible!

At the Holiday Gathering

Kids who tend to be sensory seekers may thrive on the novelty of a group gathering and find that the noise and activity revs them up. Kids who are supersensitive will tend to stay on the sidelines and risk becoming overwhelmed because too much noise, too many things to look at, too many people, and too much to process feel like an assault.

It's best to make a plan in advance with your child about what to do if he starts to feel overloaded or you noticed he's getting too wired. It's better for your child to take a break than to feel trapped in a situation he can't tolerate. At home, your child can politely excuse herself to go to her room if she needs time to regroup. If you're at someone else's home, you will need to work out a "safe space" your child can retreat to. Explain this to your host and ask where a good place might be.

A holiday gathering can be a great time to work on social skills *within reason*. Let your child know he is expected to greet people, with your help if necessary. If your child dislikes hugs, teach him to stick out his hand for a handshake. You may need to monitor this if you have a relative who insists on a big bear hug that your child finds unbearable, letting this person know you would appreciate their understanding and cooperation.

Prompt your child to say hello while making eye contact but don't force it. Group gatherings have multiple sensory and information processing demands. Some people avoid making eye contact due to visual distortions, or to avoid being distracted by facial expressions, or because they struggle to process visual and

auditory input simultaneously. A reasonable goal would be for your child to make *brief* eye contact with the person.

Bring along a busy bag, regardless of your child's age. For a younger child, washable crayons or markers, paper, coloring books, playdoh, picture books, beloved stuffed toys, and favorite music may come in handy to help soothe your child or keep her behaving at her best. For an older child, a game, book, or music may be important take-alongs. Of course you want your child to interact with others, but if he needs a break, such tools can be lifesavers. Remember, you are working toward getting your child to stay on an even keel in a potentially rocky situation.

Don't forget to give your child the sensory input his body craves. This is a good time to explain your child's sensory needs and how you are helping. If your child needs to jump and crash 20 times before sitting down to eat, do it. Go outside before or after a big meal (or during in case of an impending meltdown) to run, march, hop, skip around the block, walk through a pile of crunchy leaves, stomp in the snow. Bring along your brush if you are doing a deep touch pressure program.

Don't insist (or let others insist) that your child try something just because it's the typical holiday food. A holiday gathering is not a therapy session, and many of our kids adhere to special diets. If you know your child most likely will not eat what's being served, bring along a preferred food or a safe dessert. Others may think you're spoiling your child but that's far better than dealing with food battles and tantrums. Just explain the situation, and that you'd appreciate others not making it their business.

Finally, bring along your child's pillow and possibly bedding if she is very sensitive and you plan to stay overnight. Remember to bring a nightlight, white noise machine, or any other bedtime necessity. Your goal overall is that your child enjoy this holiday season and participate to the maximum extent possible.

Very best wishes to you and your family for the holidays and the new year! ■■

For more on handling holidays and parties, sensory comforts, and sensory diet activities please see *Raising a Sensory Smart Child* and visit www.sensorysmarts.com.