



# Sensory Smart™ Strategies for the Holidays

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While many people look forward to celebrating the holidays, the reality is that changes in routines, crowded stores, group gatherings, special foods and demands for “best” behavior can make the celebrations challenging. The good news is that, as a sensory smart parent, there is a lot you can do to help!

## Routines and Predictability are Key

Our kids thrive on predictability and routines, and letting them know what to expect will reduce distress and anxiety about the unknown.

If you have a lot of holiday preparation to accomplish, create a written or picture checklist. This will help you manage your time and give your child a sense of control over events as they are crossed off when completed. Even if you are extremely busy, don't forget to take breaks! Spending fifteen minutes in the playground, looking at a picture book, or doing whatever helps your child stay self-regulated can ultimately save a lot of time and trouble, and let you get more done.

Shop online or when stores are less crowded. Some stores even have sensory-friendly hours. If you must take your child into busy stores, be sure to bring sensory tools like chewing gum and other oral comforts, sound-reducing earmuffs or favorite music with headphones, and a hat to protect sensitive eyes from bright lighting.

Try to stick to a normal schedule with the same bedtime and wake-up time each day so you don't disrupt your child's sleep-wake cycle. This is especially important if your child is a problem sleeper. If you are taking your child to an evening celebration, this may not be possible. Your child might stay up much later than usual and either awaken at the regular time by skipping several hours of sleep, or sleep late and miss out on several hours of daytime activity. If your child's sleep schedule is disrupted, get back on track by gradually readjusting so that bedtime is 15 minutes earlier each day. If your child naps or if you plan to stay overnight, pack your child's pillow, sheets, nightlight and portable blackout shades that stick to windows.



## Get your Child Involved

Letting children help empowers them to feel part of the festivities.

Cooking is a wonderful sensory experience that can be motivating even for tactile sensitive children. Let your child help you measure, pour, mix, blend and decorate holiday food. Even if you're going to someone else's home to celebrate, let your child help you make a special side dish or dessert to bring along. Be sure to also bring a food you know that your child will eat!

Holidays are a great time to work on fine motor skills. If you are having guests over for a sit-down meal, have your child create seating cards. Show your child a photo of an ideal place setting and let your child follow this model in setting the table.

Look for holiday craft ideas and simplify them as needed. Coloring holiday-themed pictures, assembling craft kits, and hanging decorations are great fun. Every year my little clients love making pine cone turkeys by adding colored feathers, a felt face and wiggly eyes to a large pine cone. Your child can make a Kwanzaa kinara or a menorah out of Sculpey or clay, or paint a pre-cut star or other holiday symbol and sprinkle glitter on it. You will find plenty of easy craft ideas in holiday season magazines and craft stores. Look online for holiday-themed coloring pages, word searches, mazes, dot-to-dots and crossword puzzles.



Finally, the fact that many people dress up for the holidays doesn't mean you should force your child into something that will make him or her miserable. Some children may find fancy dresses and bows, button-down shirts and ties, and dress shoes to be intolerable. It's enough to simply wear something clean and neat. You may be surprised to discover that your child loves putting on a special outfit for a special occasion. Whatever your child wears, be sure to test it out several times before the event. Bring a change of clothing just in case. As always, the key is to be flexible.

## The Holiday Gathering

Keep reminding yourself that holiday gatherings are about being together, not about how your child acts and eats. Group gatherings have multiple sensory and information-processing demands that can make it a challenge to "behave."

Remind your child of social expectations that are reasonable and achievable. Your child should acknowledge each guest, if that is not overwhelming, but does not have to kiss anyone. He or she could say hello and put a hand out for a handshake instead of a hug. Teach him or her about keeping most people at arm's length to avoid becoming a space invader. Some people avoid making eye contact due to visual distortions, to avoid being distracted by facial expressions, or because they struggle to process visual and auditory input simultaneously. Do not insist that your child make eye contact! If others find it odd, so be it.



Don't force your child to eat something that he or she finds "gross" just because it's a traditional holiday food. Bring something nutritious you know your child will eat. At the same time, do offer whatever others are eating. This may be the time your child will finally try a new item, especially if a beloved friend or relative likes it. If you feel judged on your approach to food issues, point out that you are working on expanding your child's food repertoire, but that a holiday meal is not the best time to do it.

Bring along a busy bag regardless of your child's age. A younger child may find washable crayons or markers, paper, coloring books, hand fidgets, picture books, stuffed toys and favorite music helpful in staying happy and self-regulated. For an older child, such take-along items would include a handheld game, book or music. While you do want your child to interact with others, such tools can be lifesavers. Remember, you are working toward getting your child to stay regulated and happy in a potentially challenging situation.

Sensory-seeking kids may thrive on the novelty of a group gathering and find the noise and activity energizing. Kids who are sensitive, on the other hand, may tend to stay on the sidelines and be overwhelmed by too much noise, too many things to look at, too many people, and too much to process. Make a plan in advance with your child about what to do if he or she starts to feel overloaded or too wired. It's better for your child to take a break than feel trapped in an intolerable situation. At home, your child can go to his or her room for some "me" time. If you're at someone else's home, speak with the host in advance about a possible "safe haven" that your child can use if needed.

Don't forget to give children the sensory input their body craves. If your child needs to jump and crash 20 times before sitting down to eat, let him or her do it. Go outside before or after a big meal — or in the case of an impending meltdown — to walk or run around the block, walk through a pile of crunchy leaves or stomp in the snow.

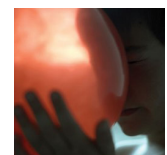
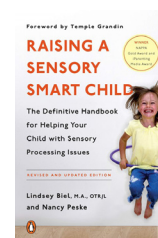
Try not to be self-conscious or apologetic about giving your child what his or her brain and body need. This can be a good time to explain your child's sensory needs and how you are empowering your child to manage them.

Praise and rewards are always appropriate if your child has behaved to the best of his or her ability. You are not spoiling your child when you celebrate success!



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