

## Hints and tips for helping children with Autism, ADHD and learning disabilities cope with Christmas at home

### Preparing for the big day:

- Use a visual structure on a calendar to show your child which day the tree will be going up and coming down, when visitors are arriving and leaving and any specific school based activities. Then tick off each event once it has happened. This will help prepare your child for a change of routine.
- **Introduce Christmas to the home at the same time as the school. Provide your child with a schedule, so they know what to expect. This schedule can be handwritten and will include a list of all the activities that will be happening during the day. Once the activities are finished, tick them off. This can help to reduce anxieties and provide a sense of security for your child if they know what will be happening.**
- Wrap each family members presents in different wrapping paper, so it is clear who each present belongs to. Use a tag to label each present with the child's name and what is inside. This will help children manage their anxiety over surprises and makes something unpredictable more predictable for them.
- **Where possible, set up items so they look like the gifts requested instead of leaving them in the box. Put batteries in toys and charge up devices so they are ready to use straight away. This will help with your child's impulsive nature and prevent behaviours associated with having to wait for toys to be set up.**
- Plan Santa visits in advance. Ring ahead and book a time slot to avoid queues and prepare your child for the visit using a social story.
- **Use social stories to prepare your child for activities that are outside of the norm, e.g. school disco, Christmas light switch on.**
- Set aside 1:1 time with your other children so your whole family feels involved with the festivities.
- **Remind your child that normal rules and structures still apply. Children often need these in place to help them feel safe and secure.**
- Dress your child in clothes they are comfortable in for parties. This will reduce anxiety levels. Dress your child in layers which are easy to take off if they become warm due to being overwhelmed.
- **Spread decorating the house over a few days. For example, put the tree up and then a few days later decorate the tree. This will give your child time to adjust.**

### On the day:

- Give your child a checklist with a list of all the presents they will be receiving and get them to tick off the items as they open them. This will help to reduce anxiety around not knowing what they will be getting. Alternatively, use clear gift wrap.
- Have a 'No Christmas Zone' where there are no decorations so your child has somewhere to go to if things get too overwhelming.
- Have activities you know will calm your child to hand. This might include a colouring/doodle book or some headphones to listen to music with.
- Take food with you that you know your child will eat to family events.
- Give your child a private space to open their presents. Sometimes, your child might need a few days to open presents.
- Ask visitors to check in advance before visiting to check the time is suitable and that your child won't find it too much having them there.
- Be mindful of additional stress. Use visual structure such as timetables and now and next boards to try and reduce this.
- Think about aspects of Christmas that are too overwhelming for your child and can perhaps be avoided.
- Carry a sensory tool kit in a pencil case. Include objects such as your child's favourite fiddle toy in order to help your child regulate when things are becoming overwhelming.

### After the day:

- Plan the return to normal routine. Show your child photos of how the house normally looks without decorations and show them on a calendar when they will be returning to school.

