

Coping Strategies; Meeting Holiday Needs of Everyone in the Family

The holiday season is a time of laughter, joy, anticipation, and surprises. However, for families raising individuals with sensory and neurological disorders it can be a very stressful time of year. Throw in a mix of typically developing children, who enjoy and can handle the added stimuli, and you have just described a parent dilemma. How do we as parents meet the needs of all family members?

Sometimes we set ourselves up to think we can't succeed in meeting everyone's needs. We do the best we can and realize that nothing is perfect, neither are we and that's okay.

Looking back I realize that, without knowing it, I had developed some great coping strategies to help the family run as smoothly as possible while enjoying the holiday season.

We learned to understand and accept that rules can't possibly be the same for everyone in the house, especially when you have a mix of typically developing children and children with disabilities. Be realistic in holding each child appropriately accountable.

Any type of large change or transition in our house was met with a meltdown or raging so, we soon developed a way of stealth decorating. One or two items were brought out in the cover of night to be introduced in the morning. The house was usually decorated by Christmas Eve if this was started right after Thanksgiving. Presents were always brought into the house after dark and when my daughter was in bed. The anticipation of a present that could not be opened for 3 weeks would send her over the edge every time.

We talked often about what would be happening the next day, such as cutting down our tree. Step-by-step we would cover the how, when, and where of the tree cutting. If I saw it was causing too much anxiety, I would plan a different outing or event for her and let the other kids go with dad to get the tree. As a family tradition we all decorated the tree, and sometimes a few meltdowns would ensue, but they were worth it because it was an event that was greatly enjoyed. Not a single present ever went under the tree until Christmas Eve. When well-meaning Grandpa's and Grandmas placed presents under the tree, the gifts were quickly rushed upstairs and into the closet.



We used an advent calendar with a reward of a piece of candy each day to count the days until Santa came. We frequently attended other holiday events that would sometimes cause over stimulation for my daughter, but that were enjoyed by the other kids. It often resulted in splitting up and trading roles.

We had to remind ourselves once again that the rules are not always the same for everyone and after about the 5th year of pictures with Santa causing anxiety and only producing the look of horror in the picture, we decided that maybe a picture with the other kids would do for now and that we could photo-shop her in later.



Christmas morning was our traditional gift opening and was always filled with a 4 a.m. mix of chaos, meltdowns, joy, and laughter, but we seemed to make it through.

The day after Christmas the tree was taken down and everything was put away. I am sure this was to save my own sanity! Our daughter was always included in this to bring closure to the season and to help transition back. However, the best holiday had to be the year that our daughter had been attending Sunday school and I was amazed at how well she was learning the very abstract concept of religion and spirituality. Something that was very hard for her. Unfortunately, a family pet passed away and she wanted to know where it went. So, I calmly told her it went to heaven. Wide-eyed she asked, "You mean Jesus likes dead animals?" To which I calmly replied, "YUP". Happy holidays everyone!

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