



National Apostolate for  
Inclusion Ministry

**Lawrence R. Sutton, PhD**

*Psychologist*  
Bureau of Autism  
Services  
State of Pennsylvania

*Catechist*  
Our Lady of Grace Church  
Scott, PA

Religious education  
program for parishioners  
with autism also includes  
children from nearby  
parishes

*Promoting the Full Participation of People with Intellectual/ Developmental  
Disabilities (IDD) in the Life of the Catholic Church*

## Holiday Visits with Autism

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*By Deacon Larry Sutton*

Holiday visits and travel can be both joyful as well as very stressful for those touched by autism when routines are changed, new people present themselves and sensory overloads come from lights, smells, and music. Anticipating holiday events and what they entail beforehand and making adjustments as situations unfold will enable the person with autism and the family to be more comfortable and at ease—allowing the holiday to be enjoyable for all.

*Early preparation will enable the child with autism to manage new people, places and things.* Create a large calendar on a white board outlining when certain things will be undertaken.

### Visiting Homes of Family and Friends

- If possible, pre-schedule the visit and place the date on the White Board Calendar. BE EXPLICIT. Include times of arriving and departing and keep to the schedule.
- If the visit is to a familiar home, identify a safe or quiet place where the person with autism is able to go if things become too stimulating. Before you visit, make sure that room or place will have a favorite book or video or provide space for a favorite activity.
- If possible, bring along a food the child will always eat. Bringing along chicken nuggets or French fries and reheating them at the friend's home will provide comfort to the child.
- If possible, don't worry about how the person with autism is dressed. Special outfits make wonderful photographs. But if the special clothes don't feel right, possibly due in part to the stress of being someplace new with unfamiliar people, tantrums can prevent Kodak moments.
- If possible, before leaving for your visit, let the person with autism preview the people you will be visiting by looking at photographs or learning names.
- Before your visit, practice with *prepared scripted responses* how to answer or sign the answer to questions such as: How old are you now? What grade are you in? How is school?
- It is often helpful to have the child with autism eat something before leaving home, particularly if you will be going to dinner.

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with Autism* by Deacon  
Larry Sutton

P.O. Box 218  
Riverdale, MD 20738

Phone: 800.736.1280  
Email: qnafim@aol.com

[www.nafim.org](http://www.nafim.org)

A hungry child touched by autism may get extremely upset upon arriving at a strange place to eat foods that look or smell different from food at home.

- Sometimes when driving to a new or unfamiliar place, playing a familiar book on tape will allow children touched by autism to be engrossed in something familiar and pleasurable rather than be ruminating on what will occur when they get to the unfamiliar place.

#### **Attending Special Church Services**

- If possible, visit the Church beforehand when few other people are present. Allow the child to look around and explore.
- Try to attend a Mass that will not be too crowded. For example, Children's Christmas Masses are beautiful, BUT they can also be very hot, crowded and long.
- Bring along things with which the individual can *stim* if need be. When the beautifully decorated Church, the dressed-up people, the wonderful sounding music, and the crowdedness become overwhelming, it is useful to have dependable snacks and favorite toys readily available: Cheerio's, match box cars, favorite story books, soft stuffed animals, blankets, etc.