



National Apostolate for
Inclusion Ministry

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Religious education program
for children with autism
includes children from
several nearby parishes

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

Christmas with Autism: At Home

By Deacon Larry Sutton

The holiday period can be both a joyful time as well as a very stressful time for those touched by autism. From preparing for Thanksgiving through New Year's Day, daily routines are changed, new people present themselves, sensory overloads come from bright lights, new smells from all of the cooking and baking, and sounds of music seemingly everywhere. Anticipating holiday celebrations and what they entail beforehand and making adjustments as situations unfold enables the person with autism and the family to be more comfortable and at ease—allowing Christmas to be enjoyable for all.

Begin early: As soon as Halloween has passed, create a large calendar on a white board outlining when certain things will be undertaken.

Where will the tree be set up?

- Do you have to move furniture? It is a good idea to move furniture one day and to set up the tree two or more days afterwards.
- Say and show where moved things will be stored until after the holidays. You will be confirming that these things are not lost or thrown away.

Will there be lights on the tree and /or inside and outside of your home?

- Show on the White Board Calendar when lights will be put on the tree.
- Show on the White Board Calendar when lights will be put up inside and outside of the house.
- Bring out the lights early and set up somewhere so that the child touched by autism can get used to the varying colors.

Will there be shiny bulbs on the tree or in various rooms of home?

- If so, place a few of them be put in small jars for couple of weeks before your home and tree are decorated so that the one with autism has a chance to see, touch and get used to some of them before they are on the tree.

Are there favorite ornaments—perhaps those with pictures or names of family members on them?

- Bring them out early so that they can be looked at and examined beforehand.

Other items for the White Board Calendar

- Visits to family and friends—BE EXPLICIT and include times of arriving and departing *and keep to your schedule.*
- School plays and concerts.
- *Must see television specials.*

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- *Must watch* video and DVD movies.
- Visits to Santa.

Meals and Food

- Have old standbys on hand. Chicken nuggets, French fries and pizza aren't exactly Christmas meal foods, but with new smells, new and different looking foods and new faces at the table, familiar and reliable foods can save a meal.
- Although it would be wonderful if the person touched by autism could sit at the large table for the holiday meal, a special Christmas meal may be saved for everyone else if the child has a special and regular place to go such as in front of a television with a favorite video.
- Talk about the different types of food that might be present and if possible, practice making or trying out some of the new or less frequently prepared food, early on. For example, Vienna sausages may look like little hot dogs but will likely be a big surprise for someone expecting the taste of a hot dog.

Christmas gifts

- Presents are wonderful, be they can be overwhelming.
- Sometimes it might be useful to stagger the opening of presents. While this can be difficult for siblings, it helps the child with autism to pace some of the stimulation. Using a white sheet to cover some presents beforehand, and then uncovering presents periodically throughout the day is a good way to stagger the opening of presents.
- Once a child stops playing with one toy and begins to attend to another, it might be useful to move the first toy out of the area, perhaps to another room, so that the child does not have to contend with competing interests between toys.
- Gifts of video games should be previewed beforehand when possible. Some games have so much stimulation between noise, music, action, and colors that one touched by autism can't help but become overly stimulated right away. Often these types of games are better left for playing at another time. Sorry, Dads!

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