



Sensory Overload during the **Holidays**

"Children with sensory processing disorder have difficulty processing information from the senses (touch, movement, smell, taste, vision, and hearing) and responding appropriately to that information. These children typically have one or more senses that either over- or underreact to stimulation." ~ healthlinkbc.ca

While some children welcome the cheer, the bright lights and the sounds of the holidays, other children can find the holiday too much. Children who have sensitivities to sensory input, can react in many ways, either staying on the sidelines to avoid being inundated by it all, or they can become over-excited and present behaviours that challenge us. Just the thought of too much noise, too many things to look at and too many people to meet, can be overwhelming for the child.

Below are some tips to consider to help meet your child's sensory needs during the holidays:

- **Talk about it!** Talk about the upcoming holidays and the events that are taking place. If the upcoming schedule is looking full with various outings and family visits, prepare your child several days in advanced through daily conversation and the use of visuals (such as a calendar). Share these events filled with enthusiasm while emphasizing the fun activities they will enjoy!
- **Routine.** Daily routine is important so waking up and going to bed at the same time over the holidays is important, although not always possible. Many children will still wake up at the same time in the morning, resulting in possibly several hours of missed sleep. Should you have a late night out, try to get back to your regular schedule with 10-15 minute adjustments daily until you reach their regularly scheduled bedtime.
- **Make a plan.** If you know your child gets overwhelmed around large groups or new people, talk to your host about a place that you can take your child that is a safe space that they can retreat to. Once your child is feeling ready to rejoin, provide them with the option to return to the holiday festivities. You may also want to consider the schedule and limit the amount of time you attend the events, ensuring that there are not too many new and over-stimulating events taking place in a row, or even leaving early before your child gets overwhelmed.
- **Being Social.** The holidays are a wonderful time to practice a child's social skills, but you must keep with their current abilities in mind. Added affection by other family members may be too much, so discuss this with your child and visitors on what to expect beforehand. You know your child best and what is appropriate for your child to manage.
- **Mealtimes.** During meal times at family gatherings, offer the child foods they like and enjoy. You may want to offer different foods to try especially if they see their favourite cousin having some, but provide them with the option. Avoid having the child eat foods in front of others that can cause stress and anxiety.



Remember: You know your child best and what is appropriate for your child to manage when outside of their comfort zone.

- **Prepare Activities.** Bring a 'busy bag' when you're out and about and/or visiting family. For younger children pack markers or crayons, paper, board books, or playdoh. A favourite toy or cuddle toy to relax with if they need some quiet time. For older children music, a book or a game they enjoy, may provide the child something to do when interacting with the people around them becomes too overwhelming. Should you be staying overnight, bring along the child's pillow and blanket for that comforting smell and touch.
- **Shopping.** If going in a busy store is a must, plan before you go and bring items that will support your child such as ear plugs, headphones with music or noise cancelling headphones. A hat slightly pulled down may help block some of the bright lights and chewing gum or other oral comforts such as 'Chewlery' can support their oral sensory need.
- **Dress Comfortably.** Often the holidays are a time for dressing up in that brand new dress or that handsome suit and tie, but for children with sensory processing concerns, this may be uncomfortable. Provide your child with a couple of choices that avoid scratchy lace, itchy holiday sweaters and tight collared shirts.

Above all, enjoy your time together as a family during the holiday season and make beautiful memories!

Additional Resources and Support:

<https://autismcanada.org/>

<https://www.cheo.on.ca/en/resources-and-support/sensory-processing-disorder.aspx#Websites>

<https://www.tvcc.on.ca/>

References:

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/te7831>

<https://mksallc.com/holidays-for-children-with-sensory-needs/>

<https://www.sensorysmarts.com/holidays.html>

