

Managing sensory differences at Christmas!

7 ideas to help children with SPD through the holidays season **(griffinot.com)**

Sensory Tip 1 – Be prepared in advance

This time of year can often be **very off schedule**. There are lots of things to do and often, unfortunately, there can be added stress associated with fitting everything and everyone in. A key thing that you can do to help children with sensory processing challenges is **be well prepared**.

Often by this stage, children have gotten themselves into a good routine at school. It's not uncommon for them to have stopped using specific timetabling strategies and/or visual supports as they are managing really well. If these strategies have **helped your child historically** I would recommend dusting them off over the holiday period. You can also use them to **talk about sensory experiences** that might be different. For example: "We are going to the fireworks, they will be loud but you can take your ear defenders and we can leave when you need to." They can also help to keep you on schedule and may just make the difference between a smooth day and a **meltdown**.

You know your child. Unless it's your first Christmas with them, you also likely know their **thresholds** and what **helps them to regulate**. Use this information to help with your schedule and planning. Give yourself permission to put their needs first when making commitments and try to find balance between what you want to achieve and what you feel they, and you, will comfortably manage.

Number 2 – Know your child's sensory triggers

This is an extension of tip one. It's really helpful to **know your child's sensory triggers** and to use this knowledge to your advantage. This way you can plan within and around them. I have deliberately put this tip between planning and regulation. It is helpful to be prepared for situations that you think might cause your child to experience **sensory overload**. This way you can include regulation strategies **beforehand and during**, if required. You might also want to make sure that other adults, e.g. extended family, or friends, who may not be as familiar with your child, know these triggers as well. That way they can also look out for and **help to support them**.

Sensory Tip 3 – Consider the length, size and venue of Christmas events

Some events and activities might just be **too long or too big**. It is useful to think about your child's triggers and what type of events they have **successfully attended** in the past. How long was this event? How many people attended? What was the venue like? Do they find it easier at home as it's more familiar? Is it helpful to have an outdoor space? **Who can help them to feel more comfortable?** At times some events might feel like they are obligatory. However, hopefully you will be able to again find a balance which will support your child to successfully attend.

Number 4 – Remember to regulate – use sensory strategies to help

As there are **so many new experiences** and so much excitement during this period, regulation is key. This is especially true for children that experience **sensory overload**. All children are different but, again, you know your child. Think about what helps them to **regulate and stay calmer**. Is it reading a book or jumping on the trampoline? Does a massage or a bath help? Maybe it a chew or their favourite toy? These supports, whether sensory or not, can be used before, during and after activities to help your child to regulate. Go back to your plan and make sure you have **scheduled them in!**

Knowing **what helps your child to regulate and having it to hand can also help**. Some families find having a portable 'calm' or 'sensory' bag which they can take with them helpful. This should include the things that help your child to calm down and stay regulated. Every child's calm bag will be different and will include the things that help them to stay regulated. A designated 'quiet room' in the house or space you're at can also help for some children (and adults). Again, this requires some planning but could be the thing that helps your child successfully participate, despite their sensory challenges.

Heavy work can be helpful for some children, we explore ideas for heavy work in this article – [The Mystery of Heavy Work](#). Also, some children use oral sensory seeking to help with regulation. We give some ideas on how to use this sensory strategy here – [Help! Why is my Child Chewing on Clothing and Other Things?](#).

And 5 – New foods = new sensory textures!

It's common for children with sensory processing challenges to have difficulty with **new and unfamiliar foods**. One suggestion is to include Christmas food **into meals during the lead up to Christmas Day**. This way the food is no

longer new. These days many Christmas foods are in stores from early October so they are not hard to find. Also, **think ahead** to the day and try to include something you know your child will eat on the menu. This can help to **reduce stress** for everyone.

Sensory Tip 6 – Presents.... including clothes!

Presents can be a super exciting part of Christmas, but can also be **stressful for some**. If your child has **sensitivities** to certain fabrics, or strong preferences for clothing it can be helpful to let other gift givers know in advance. Providing a 'wish list' can be helpful.

Noise toys can also be a challenge for some, so, again it's useful to make gift givers aware if this is the case. Also, when opening presents that make noise, it can help to give the child advanced warning of the sound. It might be that someone else has a noisy toy you need to be mindful of.

In addition, some children find the **excitement of a surprise very overwhelming**. If this is the case for your child, it can be helpful to open presents over a longer period. For some children, it helps to let them know in advance that their preferred gift is coming on Christmas day. This can decrease their stress or worry.

And finally 7 – New activities

A visit to **Santa's Grotto** is another common event that happens in December. This can be quite stressful for even neurotypical children, and their families. Again, being prepared can help. Some grottos allow you to **book in advance**. In some cases there are also some 'autism friendly' times. This will help children with sensory issues, even if they don't have autism, as there is a focus on reducing sensory overload. Two examples in the UK are [Bletchley Park](#) and [Stockeld Park](#). If you know of any others please tweet us [@Griffin_OT](#) or let us know via [Facebook](#) and we will add them to the list.

Finally the Christmas meal, it is useful to be **prepared for Christmas Crackers**. For children with [sound sensitivity](#), they can be a challenge. If you make your own you can leave out the noise maker but still have a lot of fun. Or, again, practice in advance so the child is familiar with them. Or, you can let the child leave the room when they are going to be pulled.