



## **Celebrating the Holidays When a Child Has Special Needs**

By [Jo-Anne Herina Jeffreys, Esq.](#)

Holiday crowds, twinkling lights and unfamiliar scents can confuse and even frighten a child with disabilities. The season's disruptions can be particularly painful for those who don't handle change well. But with a little planning, you can contain the stress.

### **Prepare Your Child**

Preparing your child in advance by revisiting photos from holidays past, including shots of household decorations and expected visitors will enable your child to know what to expect when the holidays arrive. You may want to rehearse certain religious rituals. Also practice opening presents, taking turns and handing gifts to others. Whether you'll be celebrating at home or someplace else, talk through what your child should do if feeling overwhelmed—go to a quiet spot to decompress or turn to an adult for support. Since anticipation makes some children anxious, consider how far in advance these talks and activities should take place.

If appropriate, involve your child in purchasing decorations and placing them around your home. You may want to decorate gradually so that your child can become accustomed to the change. Establish rules for what can and can't be touched and, for now, it may be best to keep delicate family heirlooms packed away.

If you put up a tree, choose ornaments that aren't easily broken and have soft edges. Hang them with pipe cleaners instead of sharp hooks. Consider using flameless candles.

Amidst all this disruption, try to maintain sleep and meal schedules as much as possible.

### **Out and About**

Bear in mind your child's tolerance for noise and activity. Visiting Santa at the local mall can be alarming to some. Prepare your child beforehand with pictures of Santa and tell social stories about what to expect. Check with local government, nonprofits, parks and recreation centers for events that cater to kids with special needs. You may also want to work with other parents to create at-home Santa visits.

If your child will be taking a first-ever plane trip, consider visiting the airport before your travel date. Describe the experience of boarding a plane and flying. Whenever traveling,

bring along your child's favorite books or toys. And be sure there'll be food that meets their dietary needs and preferences. Watch out for sugar overload.

### **When Company Calls**

You may want to email guests ahead of time with day-of-visit tips—that welcome hugs aren't a good idea or that your child's reaction to receiving a gift may not be quite what they expect.

When company arrives, make introductions gradually, to one or two newcomers at a time. Sometimes sitting with grown ups can be stressful, so you might arrange a children's table for mealtimes, where youngsters can feel both special and at ease.

The most important thing to remember is that your child's comfort trumps custom, so be adaptable. You may need to skip certain practices or establish your own traditions.

Finally, go easy on yourself. Let others know that you're counting on their flexibility and support. Everyone experiences periods of holiday frustration. But with some forethought, you can keep them to a minimum.

---

**About this Article:** *We hope you find this article informative, but it is not legal advice. You should consult your own attorney, who can review your specific situation and account for variations in state law and local practices. Laws and regulations are constantly changing, so the longer it has been since an article was written, the greater the likelihood that the article might be out of date. SNA members focus on this complex, evolving area of law. To locate a member in your state, visit [Find an Attorney](#).*

**Requirements for Reproducing this Article:** *The above article may be reprinted only if it appears unmodified, including both the author description above the title and the "About this Article" paragraph immediately following the article, accompanied by the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Special Needs Alliance – [www.specialneedsalliance.org](http://www.specialneedsalliance.org)." The article may not be reproduced online. Instead, references to it should link to it on the SNA website.*