



## CELEBRATING THANKSGIVING WITH YOUR CHILD ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

While the holidays are regarded with anticipation and joy for many families, families with children on the autism spectrum may have mixed feelings. During the holiday season, it is best to plan for what you can anticipate, and expect the unexpected. Children on the autism spectrum thrive on routines and sameness, and during the holidays, children are taken out of their comfort zones. (For example, they are in unfamiliar places, with many people, and are served different foods.) Changes to their usual routines and environment may be overwhelming and cause distress.

### **Thanksgiving Dinner:**

*Family perspective:* Our plan is to drive to Aunt Sally and Uncle Joe's home, about an hour away, to enjoy a family Thanksgiving feast. We visit them about once a year, at Thanksgiving. This year Grandma and Grandpa will be there, as will cousins Betsy and John. John is home from college and is bringing two of his roommates. Aunt Nancy and Uncle Rob will also be there with their new baby. Uncle Joe loves football, and it's always on. The TV will be blaring, the guys will be shouting at the screen, Aunt Sally will be in the kitchen, and the food will smell delicious. The house will be warm and the baby will alternately giggle and cry. This sounds like a fun day, but our child on the spectrum may struggle.

*Child perspective:* This is going to be a hard day. I am not going to school; Mom and Dad are not going to work. It isn't a Saturday or Sunday, so our normal weekend routine is not happening. We have a long drive and there might be lots of traffic. I will not be able to play on the computer like I usually do each afternoon. Dinner will be served earlier than I eat at home. The food will be different and I might not like it. There will be many people trying to talk to me, and it will probably be quite noisy. Everyone will be busy, and I will not know what to do.

### **How to prepare:**

Plan in advance for the day and begin to talk about it early on. Here are some ideas to make things easier on the entire family:

- Dress in comfortable clothes and bring a change of clothing if it is necessary to be dressed for pictures or dinner.
- Pack a “safety net bag” with your child’s favorite “go to” toys and games.
- Bring food that you know your child will enjoy. While the Thanksgiving feast is a favorite for many of us, not all children on the autism spectrum enjoy turkey with all the trimmings. This will be one less issue to contend with.
- Will your child be able to sit at the dinner table for the time it takes for everyone to enjoy their meal? Mention to your host that your child may not be able to sit for so long and ask if he or she can be excused early.
- Consider finding a quiet place that your child can go if he or she needs a break from the environment. Consider having this discussion with your host or hostess before the event so they can make a room or area of their home quiet, safe, and comfortable for your child.
- Plan an exit strategy with your partner. You know how long your child will last at this type of function. Some parents find it beneficial to drive separately in case their child needs to leave earlier than expected or planned.

Additionally, writing a Social Story™ outlining the day may be beneficial. A Social Story™ can include the following:

- Waking up and **not** getting ready for school
- Getting dressed in holiday clothes
- Getting in the car and activities to do on the long car ride
- Picture of the home and the people you will see
- Foods served at Thanksgiving dinner (for example, pictures of the turkey, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes)
- Seeing everyone watching the Thanksgiving Parade or playing football games, etc.
- Saying “goodbye” and getting back into the car to go home
- Things to do on the long car ride home
- Arriving home

As you think about the other holidays you celebrate with your family, some can be

adapted, and some may be too difficult to participate in according to expectations of others. Explaining to family and friends can be stressful, and other family members' needs are also important to consider. Thinking about these issues in advance and coming up with a plan that can make the holiday as pleasant as possible for your family can be the start of new traditions that everyone can take part in and enjoy.

#### Related Articles:

- [Celebrating Christmas with Your Child with ASD](#)
- [Celebrating Hanukah with Your Child with ASD](#)

#### Additional Resources

- [Autism Speaks Thanksgiving blog](#)

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