

A young child with light brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a green sweater, is smiling and playing with a string of colorful Christmas lights. The child is holding a green light in their right hand and two red and white striped candy canes in their left hand. The background is a blurred Christmas tree with warm yellow lights and colorful ornaments.

Sensory
Integration
Education

Christmas Sensory Survival Kit



With Christmas around the corner, we thought it might be helpful to share a **Christmas Sensory Survival Kit**. To help those experiencing **sensory integration or sensory processing differences** better manage the sensory challenges of the season.

We have broken Christmas into manageable chunks, offering you some of the **best advice** out there from individuals and expert organisations, including tips from neurodivergent blogger Purple Ella – look out for the Ella's Experience tips.

Big Dramatic Disclaimer

We are all individuals with individual sensory needs and preferences. All the suggestions in this Christmas Sensory Survival Kit should be tailored to you or your child's specific sensory needs, abilities and preferences.

There are a number of ways to use this guide...

- Read
- Print this document
- Make notes
- Highlight information
- Cross out info to suit you
- Make lists
- Share with friends and family

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Be reassured it's better to be comfortable than to fit in. (Psst. it's okay to skip wearing your scratchy Christmas jumper from Gran).



Out & About

Some people enjoy the first signs of Christmas – the scent of pine, twinkling lights, and Christmas classics playing on the radio – but others may find the changes to environment and schedules harder to cope with.

Public spaces become busier, decorations appear everywhere, and not to mention the enthusiastic Christmas carolers and Santas. It can all become a bit overwhelming.

Don't fret, there are tools you can use to help manage the peak of Christmas. We've come up with a packing list of items that could help manage busy spaces during this time...

- Ear defenders/ear plugs
- Headphones/earbuds (pick your own music)
- A drink and preferred snacks
- Chewable items to help with self-regulation
- Favourite fidgets
- Weighted toys or lap pads
- Sunglasses
-
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(Tick off the ones you have, cross out items that aren't suitable for you and add your own as a handy reminder.)

What to wear can also be a challenge. Season changes can be a struggle for individuals with sensory sensitivities. The shift from light layers to heavier, more restrictive winter clothing can be taxing. We've listed some wardrobe switches that might help. Take a look...

Traditional Winter Clothes	Sensory Swaps
Bobble hat	A peaked cap to help limit the visual field OR earmuffs
A jumper	A hooded jumper to cover the ears and eyes
A traditional woven jumper	Comfy fleece, soft on the skin
Multiple layers	Compression clothes
Button fastenings	Popper fastenings
Gloves	Long sleeves with thumb holes
Laces	Velcro

Remember that as individuals, some of these options may be better than others. Highlight the options you prefer or would like to try. You could start integrating the changes earlier, to give you or your child more time to adapt.

Need to hit the shops? Involve your child in choosing the items and respect their views. Wash new items before worn, this will remove unfamiliar scents and soften the fabric. More info [here](#) on sensory challenges of the changing seasons.

To-buy list:

Christmas Activities

School at Christmas

The lead-up to Christmas often involves many school celebrations. The best advice we can give is to talk to the school with plenty of time before Christmas. Chat to your child's teacher about ways to include them that accommodate their sensory differences. You could pass on [this blog](#) from Mr Finch on creating an inclusive nativity play.

Discuss with your child what it could look like for them at school, the changes in routine, and about what is happening during Christmas break.

Here is a [useful article](#) from Reachout ASC, loaded with practical ideas to manage all those Christmas-related activities at school. We particularly like the idea of using social stories to explain all the differences. A social story is a series of pictures illustrating an activity or event step by step. You could create your own or look for downloadable ones online: blogger AndNextComesL has collated a list of free festive social stories [here](#).

Key point: Your child doesn't have to miss out on those special Christmas moments. There are plenty of activities for children with sensory processing difficulties to enjoy.

Make Christmas Decorations Together

Sensory seekers who delight in slime, may enjoy this [Christmas tree slime](#) recipe from Little Bins for Little Hands. Or how about [making pretend snow](#) from two simple household ingredients – see this tutorial from the BBC.

For kids that don't like sloppy textures, there are plenty of mess-free fine motor Christmas crafts, such as this [tutorial on creating a festive jumper with stickers](#) from Taming Little Monsters.



Sensory preferences are very specific to the individual. Consider if the person is a sensory seeker or a sensory avoider. This helps you to make decisions on what will and won't work.

Santa's Grotto

Check out your local Santa's Grotto, some grottos around the UK offer times for autistic visitors or those with sensory processing difficulties. Often there will be minimal staff, soft or no music, fewer people as well as lower lighting.

Can't find a grotto that offers this service? Sensory Friendly Solutions wrote an article containing lots of practice advice to [make your child's visit to Santa a success](#).

Local Christmas Film Viewings

Many cinemas offer viewings that are suitable for individuals with sensory integration differences – you might see them described as 'autism friendly'. Here [Dimensions UK](#) shares more tips. Always get in touch ahead of booking.

If this doesn't suit you, you could create a cinema/ movie night at home?

Include favourite treats to eat and drink, close curtains, and get cosy with blankets and pillows. With the added bonus of no adverts!

Our team's favourite Christmas movies are...

- Home Alone
- A Boy Called Christmas
- Elf
- Dr Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas
- The Muppet Christmas Carol

What movie would you like to see?



There needs to be a lot more emphasis on what a child can do instead of what he cannot do.

– Temple Grandin



Ella advises when last minute plans pop up, try to communicate any schedule changes quickly and calmly. To allow all involved to process the upcoming event or changes.



If you're feeling overwhelmed, practise the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, as described [here](#) by blogger Emily of @21andsensory.

Time Out

Self-regulation is intertwined with how the body understands, manages and reacts to information from our senses – both about what is happening in our environment and what is happening within our own body. Dramatic changes to daily/weekly routines can be very dysregulating for both children and adults. With some forethought, you can plan how you will support yourself or your child from becoming overwhelmed or getting energised to participate in activities.

Here are some ways to look after yourself this season:

1

Keep Moving

The festive season can involve a lot of sedentary days: plan in regular movement breaks.

Activities involving pushing or pulling or carrying heavy weights are particularly helpful.

2

Keep Calm & Self-Regulate

Fall back on your favourite self-regulation techniques to self soothe, which may include music, fidget toys/jewellery, chewing gum or chewy foods, drinking a smoothie through a straw, etc.

3

Maintain Routine

Routine is key, try to keep meal and bed time the same. Are you feeling hungry, thirsty or tired? Section your day like normal, but with those Christmas plans dotted in!

4

Schedule Quiet Time

Ensure quiet time by scheduling it into the calendar. Quiet days are great to help re-energise and shouldn't be seen as a luxury!

Find out more self-regulation techniques in our article [here](#).

If you are receiving therapy for sensory integration or processing difficulties, ask your SI Practitioner for individualised advice that fits your unique sensory needs.



Laura

Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, Advanced SI Practitioner, Feeding Therapist and Teacher.



Louisa

Highly Specialist Occupational Therapist, Advanced SI Practitioner, Feeding Therapist and Teacher.

Eating & Cooking

Laura and Louisa suggest that “just because it’s Christmas doesn’t mean meals have to change”. They suggest making sure preferred foods are available alongside the festive specials they may want to try!

The best way to introduce new foods is to be collaborative...

Shop Together

Involve the individual in the food shop to identify any festive foods that they might want to try. Overindulging is a part of Christmas, let go of drawing attention to bad vs good foods (Psst. No one needs to discuss the New Year diet).

Cook & Bake Together

Familiarise the individual with different smells, tastes, and textures associated with festive food. With no pressure to eat it afterward.

Laura and Louisa suggest before a gathering...

- Pack familiar foods
- Bring equipment that supports feedings
- Set realistic expectations for the host

For children with severe and complex needs Laura has a blog article on [Mince pies and other pastries](#).

Laura and Louisa are trainers on our [highly popular courses for all professionals supporting children with feeding difficulties](#).



Who said we all need to eat a traditional Christmas dinner and pudding? Ella suggests making new traditions involving your family's favourite foods. Ella's family celebrates Cheesemas (a feast of all cheese to enjoy together).



Introduce Christmas Crackers by practising with some cheap or leftover ones. Warn your child in advance about the noise and items that fall out. Or make your own without any snaps.

Decorating

It's fair to say a huge part of Christmas is the decorations. Having read some wonderful advice from [The National Autistic Society](#), here's how you could mindfully decorate your home...

- Gradually introduce the decorations into the chosen environments
- Involve the person in the decorations, respecting any strong opinions on what is used and how/ they are hung/positioned.
- Keep the bedrooms or/and kitchen a decoration-free zone. To maintain a calming & usual space to be.



Christmas scents and candles can be super overwhelming sensory-wise so could be avoided when decorating. Flashing fairy lights can be overwhelming.

– Christmas Tips by National Autistic Society



Ella says to limit the amount of time you display your decorations. Keep the enjoyment short, but sweet!



Plan ahead! Don't limit your plan for Christmas day only, the trick for making Christmas special is to plan, creating a to-do list or a Christmas calendar for the entire festive period.

Socialising & Celebrating

As your calendar begins to fill up, it's important to manage expectations. Things to consider while you make plans...

Retreat

Have a quiet place in mind to retreat to during an outing.

Be Flexible

Leaving early is a real possibility, be flexible and encourage your loved ones to accept/understand this.

Inform

Prepare friends and family, informing them of certain needs that should be met, e.g. Adjust space according to sensitivities.

Familiarise

Remind, or introduce family/friends through a photo of them before the meeting.

Cater

Bring food to suit you/your child.

Plan Ahead

Plan activities that are calming for the nervous system - include a walk or play in the park.

The **National Autistic Society** warns about scheduling too many activities during the holiday period, particularly lots of social activities on consecutive days. Allow quiet days after an active day for rest, if needed.



When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.

- Alexander Den Heijer

Christmas Traditions

In short, make your own way of celebrating or simply getting through this busy period. Many Christmas traditions, such as an advent calendar, can be about building excitement and counting down to the big day but for some people this builds tension and anxiety. In reality, there are no rules or compulsory elements to this season, although the changes are hard to avoid in public spaces (online shopping, anyone?).



Forget conformity and make this season about what works for you or your family.



Place gifts in a bag with tissue paper, to allow the individual to peek at the gift before receiving it.



Present Giving & Receiving

Opening surprise presents, feeling the sensation of different wrapping paper and tape and unexpected textures beneath and dealing with the expectations of how to react can be very overwhelming.

Wrapping Presents

The Gina Davies Autism Centre offers some alternative ideas to traditionally wrapped presents and also how to make small changes to the process of unwrapping gifts to make it less daunting to someone with sensory differences.

Some advice for gift giving:

- Open gifts in private
- Inform or show them the gift before it's opened
- Space out the gifts throughout the day or over a couple of days

- Rather than gifts, suggest friends put money towards an activity

Some advice for buying gifts:

- Schedule time for shopping
- Avoid busy shopping hours
- Shop online

Need some help with gifts for loved ones with sensory integration differences? [Here's our guide for all ages.](#)



Understand that everyone's behaviors are on the same continuum of responses, it is easier to see we are more like each other than different from each other.

- Winnie Dunn

And Finally...

Keep a Journal

We know reading this guide can feel overwhelming and can be a lot of responsibility. Why not keep a journal or diary with notes that worked well and didn't? Every individual's needs will be different and it will give you a helpful reminder for next year.



Keep a diary to see what did and didn't work for you or your child.

Be Kind, Be Flexible

Although it may feel frustrating, we need to show compassion when things don't go to plan. Adding pressure on a person who is feeling sensory overload isn't helpful.

Ask friends and family to respect routine and decisions based on the individual's needs.

Emphasise to the individual that they don't need to mask their feelings. Reiterate it's okay to not feel okay and to seek out a self-regulating activity instead.

Helpful Resources

Purple Ella

<https://www.purpleella.com>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_BtKEtexnw

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22lvCbJprjE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOOXRid3tdc>

Sensory Integration Education

[Managing Christmas sensory challenges](#)

[Gift guide](#)

[Popular courses for all professionals supporting children with feeding difficulties](#)

National Autistic Society

[Christmas tips](#)

[Christmas cookery](#)

[Christmas resources](#)

[Vue Cinema autism friendly screenings](#)

Reachout ASC

[Autism and Christmas](#)

Christmas Activities

[Make your visit to Santa a success](#)

[Christmas tree slime](#)

[Pretend snow](#)

[Festive jumper with stickers](#)

[A happy and inclusive nativity](#)

[Cinema trips with sensory integration difference](#)

[Free festive social stories](#)

Time Out

[5 4 3 2 1 grounding technique](#)

[Self regulation techniques for sensory teens](#)

Eating & Cooking

[Food fun with mince pies and other pastries](#)

Present Giving & Receiving

[Gina Davies' Christmas challenges](#)



If you are the parent, don't forget to be kind to yourself too!



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