



ALTOGETHER AUTISM

JOURNAL

CHRISTMAS 2014

ASD CHRISTMAS SURVIVAL EDITION

ASD CHRISTMAS SURVIVAL

FEEDING DIFFICULTIES IN CHILDREN
WITH AUTISM

ASD AND THE SUPPORT OF SIBLINGS

HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AT HOME AND
AWAY

CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATIONS FOR
STUDENTS WITH ASD

INFORMING · EMPOWERING · CONNECTING
ALTOGETHER
AUTISM
THROUGH KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE



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IN THIS ISSUE

3

Coping with Christmas

Shannon Clement's tips for surviving the silly season for those on the spectrum

4

ASD Christmas Survival

Daniel Smith's ideas for coping with increased social activity and changes in routine.

5

Feeding Difficulties in Children with Autism

Strategies to help your child eat new foods and eat a varied diet.

7

ASD and the Support of Siblings

The positive effects of growing up with a sibling who has ASD.

9

Holiday Activities at Home

The holiday season is an opportunity to practice coping with new activities and routines.

11

Holiday Activities Away from Home

Preparation is key to making travel as comfortable for the ASD traveler.

13

Preparing for School After the Holidays

Tips to minimise the stress for the transition back to school after the holidays.

14

Classroom Accommodations for Students with ASD: Tips for the new term

Tips to minimise the stress for the transition back to school after the holidays.

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FOR THE LOVE OF CHRISTMAS

Katie really looks forward to celebrating Christmas every year, and her planning for it starts on the 26 December. The list, the all important list. As if any one could forget that the festive season as we know it would collapse if one did not receive 50 kodak photos, 10 DVDs and two books illustrated by Steven Kellogg, two reams of paper, two boxes pens, two shampoo, two soap, two boxes of coke, one nightie, minus the partridge in the pear tree. Katie keeps the spirit of Christmas alive in our family. Attitude and



planning make Christmas what it is and Katie has both in abundance and we love her for it.

In the past we have never put up the tree until the 3 December so as to support Katie not to confuse Christmas with the other critical date on her calendar, her birthday (2nd), also requiring multiple lists just in case we forget.

I'm not sure who we have been kidding but that's our Katie, patient as ever, waiting for us to catch up with her thinking and planning. This year Katie turned 28 and the tree was up by December 1st, completely constructed and decorated by her good self. It's a Work of Art. Merry Christmas everyone.

- Sue Robertson

COPING WITH CHRISTMAS

By Shannon Clement

Shannon Clement is an Auckland mother of two pre-schoolers, one on the spectrum and the other not. She is married, works part-time in online marketing and has recently been diagnosed with ASD. She shares her top tips for coping with Christmas.

I used to wonder what was wrong with me when I started panicking and needing to escape pre-Christmas shopping crowds while everyone around me seemed so happy. But, having been recently diagnosed with ASD, I can now appreciate (and forgive) my challenges, particularly around Christmas when social pressures elevate. Even before diagnosis I had quietly created a lot of coping mechanisms that allowed me to get through this time of year relatively happily. Hopefully the following approaches will help this season go more smoothly for you too.

Buy gifts early or online

Gift shopping in a busy pre-Christmas mall is my personal idea of hell so I just don't do it. If I can't get out there before the rush, I do it online from home. Sometimes the actual purchase can't be completed online, but the research can, allowing a quick in-and-out trip to the exact right shop.

Organise your helpfulness

The arbitrary and busy nature of helping out on the day, whether it's in the kitchen or with the kids, is often confusing and awkward but that's no excuse to avoid helping. By offering in advance to take on a particular task, you can prepare and feel confident that you'll know what you're doing on the day. Pick something that plays on your strengths and, if you work better on your own than as a group, choose something that is best done by one person. Some ideas: Create a beautiful table setting, take charge of one dish, drinks or snacks, organise a backyard cricket match or direct an indoor video/board game/competition.

Rest up

There's no avoiding that Christmas Day is likely to be a very social, and therefore potentially draining, time. Take care of yourself in the lead-up and the come-down. I tend to spend some quality time on my own the day before and after Christmas Day - a sort of prep and recovery time. This could be a good time to schedule some time with your special interest.

Say yes to the important stuff

As tempting as it is to stay home at times, I force myself to attend the really important social engagements. For me, they include the official work Christmas party, family meals and a photo opportunity with Santa for my kids. There are always plenty to choose from but, by committing to just a few, you'll avoid burning out before the big day and can let the others go in the knowledge that you're making a smart and measured judgement call.

Scope out a chill-out spot or person

On arrival for Christmas dinner or, if possible, before the day, I tend to seek out a spot that will take me away from group noise and busyness if/when I need it. This is not a hiding spot to skulk in all day long, but a sanctuary to recharge in as needed. In the absence of a place to be alone, think about the people you are most comfortable with and aim to generate a few one-on-one conversations with them. Odds are there may be more than one autistic person in your family and they'll be looking for a similar low-key engagement as you.

Ask questions

Those who are not on the spectrum will often make assumptions about what they believe to be "common sense". They may expect that you know when to offer to help, whether you can or should help yourself to food/drinks and how or where you should settle in as a guest. When I'm unsure, I ask outright. Sometimes people might think me a little strange for this but I figure it's far better to be up front about clarifying expectations than avoiding them.

Prepare for change

Even the best laid plans can fall apart and, with a large group of different personalities involved, it's inevitable that some of your ideas or plans of the day will be thrown out. At any social event I start out in the knowledge that changes will happen, that I might not like some of those changes and that, in the interests of group harmony, I will need to take a few deep breaths and roll with it. ■

ASD CHRISTMAS SURVIVAL

By Daniel Smith

Christmas is a time for families and celebrations, the decorations and the getting together, a time for love and laughter, however for a family with children with autism it can be stressful with the child often becoming confused and distressed. There are many strategies for coping with the increased social activity and change in routine, there are none that will work 100%. The following are 12 tips that may be adapted to suit your particular child(ren).

MAKE A SCHEDULE. Use a calendar to highlight when Christmas is, when school finishes, when decorations will be put up and taken down. Use the schedule to count down the days to when different things are happening and explain what will happen.

BE INVOLVED WITH THE SCHOOL. Talk to your school and find out when they will be introducing Christmas topics, use the same words symbols and phrases the school will use.

BE ADAPTABLE. Remember your child may not see Christmas the way that you or others do. It may be frightening or unnerving for them. Don't put too much pressure on yourself or your child to conform to the usual Christmas rituals. Do what is comfortable for you both and include your child in your activities.

DON'T OVERDO IT. Think about what you really have to do and what you can do without. Does Christmas have to be throughout the house or can you create Christmas free zones, do you really need that photo with Santa or will a home photo by the tree do? Watch out for possible sensory overload through candles, decorations, lights, food and Christmas crackers.

INVOLVE YOUR CHILD. Even if this just means being in the room when decorations are put up it may ease the transition. If they need to be actively involved, give them a specific job to do. Try spreading decorating out over a few days, an example maybe put the tree in place for a few days before you decorate it.

CHRISTMAS FREE ZONE. Create a room your child can go to and get away from Christmas, to be themselves and escape overload situations. This will also allow you to monitor your child's anxiety levels and help you to adapt to the needs of your child.

REMEMBER SIBLINGS. Christmas is a time for all the family and time needs to be put aside for your other children, make this time scheduled, maybe when your

autistic child can spend time on a lone activity in the Christmas free zone.

SCHEDULED SHOPPING. Set the parameters of your shopping before you go, list the shops you are going to in order and try not to deviate from it if possible. Schedule activities into your shopping that your child enjoys. If your child struggles with sensory overload in shops earplugs, personal stereos or dark glasses may help.

SANTA VISITS. If you decide to do this try to book in advance, contact the shopping centre and talk to them about the issues your child has, most will be willing to accommodate you in some way by giving a scheduled appointment, or seeing you at the start or the end of the day to minimise waiting time.

PLAN YOUR PRESENTS. Allow your child to dictate when presents are opened, this could be to a schedule or when they feel ready, maybe when they are on their own or before or after their siblings. If your child doesn't handle surprises try using a clear wrap for their presents or no wrapping at all. Make sure toys are ready to use, batteries inserted, tags removed, computer games loaded. Give your child some stock phrases to say for response of a present like "thank you for the gift".

MANAGE VISITORS. Put people visiting on your child's schedule maybe with a photo so your child recognises them. Ask family and friends to stagger their visits and help you care for the child over the festive period. If your visitors don't know much about ASD explain it to them in advance of their visit.

PLAN FOR NORMAL. Schedule the time things will go back to the child's regular routine, mark on the calendar when the decorations will come down, when the child will return to school etc. Use photos to remind your child what the house usually looks like and set a defined end to the festive period.

While this is not an exhaustive list of coping strategies, with your knowledge of your child's strengths and weaknesses at least some of these may be adapted to help make the festive period a happy and joyous occasion for your whole family.

This information has been adapted from "A guide to the festive season for parents and caregivers of children with Autism" produced by the National Autistic Society, UK. ■

FEEDING DIFFICULTIES IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Dianne Ferguson

Christmas can be a challenging time for many reasons, and if you have a family member with food sensitivities, celebratory meals can become a battle field. Dianne Ferguson is a registered Occupational Therapist currently working at the Child Development Centre at Waikato Hospital, and was also involved in setting up the ASD Coordinator role in Southland as she has a special interest in working with children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Dianne is a past member of our Professionals Expert Group and offers some suggestions for encouraging children with ASD to try new foods.

Children with ASD frequently have significant feeding difficulties with a highly restricted range of foods being eaten. Feeding difficulties may be the first early problem a child may present with, in a child who later goes on to be diagnosed with ASD. Early feeding difficulties may include later acceptance of solids than is typical and being “slow feeders” at 6 months of age. From 15 months until 54 months they are reported to be consistently difficult to feed and over time their diet may become more and more restricted. These feeding issues can be very stressful for the child and family. Contributing factors that interfere with development of feeding in children with ASD are medical problems, poor oral motor development, sensory difficulties, communication deficits, learning differences, and behaviour problems.

If you are concerned about your child’s restricted diet start with a visit to his/her GP to rule out any medical issues such as constipation. It may also be worthwhile seeing a dentist to rule out tooth ache being the cause of your child not eating well.

The following are some suggestions to encourage your child to try new foods and eat a varied diet.

Food Diary

Complete a food diary for 3 days. Record everything your child eats, the time of day and the amount they eat. This will provide you with some useful information about your child’s eating patterns and help you to understand the reasons for your child’s restricted diet. Sometimes this can be reassuring as you may find that your child actually has a better and more stable diet than you thought. Take note of the colour, the texture, flavour or shape of the food as children with ASD will often only eat food with a certain texture or colour.

Structure and Routine

Children with ASD respond well with structure and routine so having your child eat at the same place and follow the same mealtime schedule and routine each day will help them know what to expect. Warn your child the meal will be ready soon and follow the same routine of washing hands before eating to help them transition to the table for the meal. Sit at the kitchen table for the meal and allow them to sit in the same place using the same plates and cutlery each day if necessary.

Set meal times

Set aside five or six meals/snacks for the day and try not to allow snacking on food or drink between meals as this decreases the appetite and willingness to try new foods.

Preparation for meal times

Encourage your child to be involved in food preparation and to handle the food. This will give them the opportunity to have contact with food without the pressure of eating it. Try making sandwiches, fruit kebabs, and pizzas, measuring ingredients or stirring cake mixtures.

Family meal times

Eat together as a family at the kitchen table. Each person should have some of each food on their plate and there should be at least one preferred food of the child with ASD. If the child cannot tolerate all the foods on their plate, put the food they do not want on a separate plate beside them. Ensure the meal time is a positive experience with encouraging social interaction and talking about the properties of the food without the focus being on the child and their eating. Everyone is to stay at the table and meal times are best limited to no more than 15 – 30 minutes.

Range of food in diet

Make a list of all the food your child will eat and at meal times offer a particular food once every 2-3 days so that foods are rotating through their diet. This will help your child keep eating the foods they currently eat and not eat the same food every day. Try making a very small change to the way the food is presented for a food your child already likes. For example add something to it or change the shape by cutting it in a different way.

Physical Environment

Ensure there are no visual or auditory distractions at meal times and the environment is calm e.g. turn TV and radio off. Provide a comfortable and supportive sitting position including providing foot support. Physical stability promotes good feeding behaviours and reduces distracting behaviours such as swinging legs. Use a high chair if age appropriate or a booster seat if necessary so your child can reach the table.

Visual strategies

Use a visual schedule to help your child follow the routine at meal times. For older children menus can be prepared for the day or week. Food books can be made with pictures or photos of foods the child likes and new foods can be added as they increase the range of foods eaten. Social stories may be used to help children learn what to expect at meal times and/or why we need to eat. If your child has a special interest, this can be used e.g. a Thomas the Tank Engine plate, or having animal-shaped chicken pieces. Timers can be used so your child will know when the meal will be ready, or to provide a visual cue as to how long they will be sitting at the meal table

Professional Advice

Seek professional advice if your child is losing weight, showing a sign of poor health is not eating food from all the different food groups and is eating the same food every day and/or they are becoming increasingly more restricted in the range of food eaten. Also seek help if meal time behaviours are causing stress. One or more of the following health professionals may be able to help managing with feeding difficulties:

Dentist - eating difficulties may result in poor dental hygiene management and a dental nurse can help with tooth decay

Dietician – can offer advice on healthy eating and provide advice to help with both weight gain and loss.

Clinical psychologist - if the problem is thought to be psychological, these professionals can help to implement cognitive and behaviour strategies

Paediatrician - experts in child health issues who can help provide solutions to dietary issues.

Occupational therapist - may be able to offer advice on how you manage sensory difficulties relating to feeding difficulties.

Speech and language therapist - have a good working knowledge of how the mouth and jaw function and will be able to advise on feeding issues.

Child Development Service – some services have multi disciplinary Feeding Clinics that help children with complex feeding problems. ■

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ASD AND THE SUPPORT OF SIBLINGS

By Matthew Pryor

Manager Communications and Learning - Parent to Parent

When a child is born with or diagnosed with ASD, the whole family is impacted. Although parents are the primary caregivers for a child with an ASD, the siblings are also greatly impacted. The presence of a brother or sister with ASD is considered stressful, as research and lived experience can tell us, but ASD can also have many positive effects on both the sibling with and without ASD.

Children who have a sibling with ASD are often well behaved, responsible and compassionate. They often have to grow up quickly, learning that 'life is not fair' before other children of their age, and become aware of the realities of financial hardship, fear, and recognition that their parents can't 'make things better' far earlier than expected.

In general, young children have more concern for themselves than the world around them - they have little understanding about how things affect others. Once they attend school, children begin to see and understand how others see and experience things, and their sibling's differences become more apparent. When siblings become adolescents, they may be embarrassed by their brother or sister, and then feel guilt for this embarrassment. Siblings may also feel burdened by responsibilities (such as completing additional chores), but may also feel they must protect their sibling from the teasing and criticism of others.

The sibling relationship is unique. Unlike the parents, siblings of children with ASD don't usually have a concept of life without living with someone who has ASD. The relationship is often longest lasting, because it continues past the death of the parents; siblings share a history between them that is more similar than they will experience with anyone else. The acceptance of the sibling with ASD by the sibling without ASD is imperative in the overall development and self esteem of both children.

Siblings are the first people we learn to fight, compromise, and makeup with. The siblings are often fearful of adding to the family stress level, and hold their feelings inside. Open discussion of these feelings helps prevent siblings holding in feelings until they fester into explosive anger, depression or physical complaints.

Siblings will ask questions that will become more

detailed as they grow older, and they may have a strong need to have as much information as they can about the ASD, which can endure their entire lifetime. It is important for them to have answers to these questions, and they need to be told specifically about the limitations and strengths that ASD can cause. Having the information puts fears into perspective – in most cases, the fear of the unknown is worse than the reality of the truth. Without knowledge, non-disabled children may feel that parents are not protecting their sibling, that others may hurt them, be fearful of medical professionals and have difficulty trusting others.

The Parent to Parent SibSupport programme is designed to help equip siblings who have a wide range of disabilities to deal with the good and the challenging aspects of growing up with a brother or sister with a disability. The social aspects of the programme provide siblings with an opportunity to expand

The sibling relationship...is often the longest lasting, because it continues past the death of the parents; siblings share a history...that is more similar than they will experience with anyone else.

their support network by meeting and making friends with other children who have similar home situations. Meeting other children who share these similarities not only helps to remove the "I'm the only one in the world" feelings, but puts their home life into context, and gives a feeling of normality to their living situation.

The programme's main feature is the SibShop; this is a workshop where siblings are encouraged to openly voice any feelings, frustrations or questions in a safe and confidential environment. SibShops are facilitated by specially trained facilitators who are also siblings of people with disabilities, and can address any issues from participants from the perspective of someone who has lived a similar experience. In order to ensure that siblings feel completely safe to speak openly, the SibShops are closed to anyone other than the siblings and the facilitators.

Siblings attend the SibShops in groups according to their age bracket, and the facilitators engage and encourage siblings to participate in the sessions using a series of activities and games applicable to their

age. Every group is different, and the facilitators are skilled in ensuring that the participants only share what they are comfortable with, and no expectations are imposed.

Many of the children come back to the programme on an annual basis, and some progress through to becoming a sibling leader and even facilitators. The sibling leaders are an important aspect of the SibSupport programme as they provide a 'big brother or sister' mentor role, and help the members of the group to establish friendships and bonds that will last well beyond the duration of their time in the SibSupport programme. The sibling leaders join in all aspects of SibSupport with their groups; becoming a Sibling Leader is the natural progression for children who outgrow the SibSupport programme, but want to remain involved.

SibSupport is a programme that recognises the importance of the sibling's role in the good life of their

disabled family member, and equips siblings to grow up with a positive view of the future of their family. SibSupport introduces siblings with a disabled brother or sister to groups of children with similar experiences, and helps siblings to view their situation from a much more realistic perspective. This perspective allows siblings better function within their family, and provides the unique support for their brother or sister, that only a sibling can provide. ■

Parent to Parent holds regular SibSupport programmes nationwide. In 2015, programmes are planned for Auckland, Waikato and Manawatu. Check with your Altogether Autism Regional Coordinator for upcoming programmes, or visit parenttoparent.org.nz. SibSupport programmes are provided at no cost to families, and some travel assistance may also be available.

SIBSUPPORTNZ

A programme especially for siblings aged 8 to 18 who have a brother or sister with a disability

Programmes are held nationwide. Contact Parent to Parent to register your child's interest.

0508 236 236
parenttoparent.org.nz
sibsupport@parent2parent.org.nz



HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AT HOME

The term has ended and you can get off the merry-go-round that you've been on all through the year. Here in New Zealand, the summer holidays bring with them Christmas and New Year, and can be a very special time. But the summer holidays can also bring stress as we juggle family needs with work commitments and financial pressures – not to mention our own need for a good long break!

For families who live with autism, the inevitable change in routine that comes with the holidays may require extra planning. While change can be difficult, it is unavoidable, and the holiday season offers potentially enjoyable opportunities to practice coping with new activities and routines. If it is difficult to leave the house, invite another child or family for a play date. If your child finds it hard to share favourite toys, pack these away when visitors are coming.

Holiday activity ideas at home:

- Simple cooking – popcorn, cupcakes, fruit platters
- Sensory play – play dough, fingerpaint, goop or slime (see recipes).
- Water play
- Art and craft
- Chalk drawings
- Music, singing, dancing
- Board games
- Games to practice social skills (Lego, treasure hunts, etc.)
- Physical activities (try Zumba Kids, Xbox Kinect)
- Technology activities

Recipes for sensory play

Playdough – uncooked

2 cups flour
1 cup salt
1 cup water
2 tbsp oil
1 tsp food colouring

Put flour and salt in bowl.

Mix water, oil and colouring and combine with dry ingredients.

Knead well, extra flour may be required.

Playdough - cooked

1 cup salt
2 cups flour
4 tsp cream of tartar
2 cup water
2 tbsp cooking oil
food colouring

Instructions

Mix dry ingredients together. Add water, oil and colouring. Blend until smooth. Stir over heat until mixture becomes comes away from the sides and forms a ball. Tip onto board and knead well.

Fingerpaint

Boil a jug of water
In a large bowl or basin mix:
2 cups cornflour
1 cup cold water

Ensure water is boiling, then while stirring the cornflour and cold water, slowly pour in the boiling water. Keep pouring and stirring (having two people working together helps!) until the mixture 'grabs' or suddenly becomes thick.

Stop pouring and stir the mixture until it becomes smooth and translucent. Add more hot water if too thick.

Add 1/2 cup Lux soap flakes and stir well. Add tempera paint for colour. Present fingerpaint in small containers, e.g. margarine pots. Different colours are useful for colour mixing experiences. Leave one container white.

Provide a flat, smooth surface for children to work on, e.g. table top or formica boards made from offcuts. Have aprons and a bowl of water and towel for handwashing nearby. Playing music can stimulate rhythmic actions.

Fingerpaint will keep in the fridge for one or two days.

Cornflour Gloop

Slowly add 1 cup of cold water to 2 cups of cornflour in a bowl. Stir until the water is absorbed by the cornflour. Add colour if wanted. Present gloop in ice-cream or large containers with spoons, cups, etc.

Slime

Dissolve 1 cup of Lux flakes in 2 litres of warm water. Add colouring if wanted. Allow the mixture to stand until it becomes thick and slimy. Beat with eggbeater to make it froth.

Present slime in a wide, open container or trough. Provide eggbeaters, spoons, funnels, cups, sponges, sieves, whisks, etc. for children to experiment with. ■

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Prism Professional Development Series has been developed by Altogether Autism specifically for professionals working with people on the autism spectrum.

The series has been designed in consultation with Tanya Breen Consultant Clinical Psychologist and maintains Altogether Autism's emphasis on evidence-based strategies.

The interactive workshops are completely customisable, so you choose the topics, time frame and the location.

Each workshop is delivered by trained researchers and facilitators.

We are now taking bookings for 2015 and recommend you contact us to see how Prism can benefit you.

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HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES AWAY FROM HOME

Transitions can be difficult for people with ASD and travel is really a series of transitions. Preparation is the key to making travel as comfortable as possible. Here are some tips to prepare both the ASD traveller, and the environment

If you are planning an activity at a new destination, or if there are specific rules that need to be followed, prepare your child in advance for the experience (for example, “At the movies, we use our whisper voice and we sit in our chair until the movie is over.”) If you plan to visit public parks or events, try to phone ahead to advise them of your child’s specific needs. They may offer discounts, or recommend the best time to visit.

Possible destinations:

- Local parks, pools and libraries.
- Libraries, museums and art galleries.
- Beaches and lakes
- Zoos and aquariums (consider purchasing a seasonal pass if these are favourite places)
- Family/friend’s house
- Shopping centre
- \$2 shops
- Bookstores
- Restaurants
- Indoor playground

When holidaying away from home, even more preparation may be wise.

Visual schedules: Put up a monthly calendar and mark off the days until departure. Take the calendar with you and continue to mark off the days for each stage of the trip. Clearly mark the day you return home.

As travel can involve a lot of waiting, you can make life a lot easier if you practice waiting before making any long journeys.

Waiting Boards: For this, you need a hard board, a picture that your child understands means ‘waiting’, a picture of a frequently requested item, some Velcro dots and a visual timer.

- Make a picture that represents ‘waiting’ and stick it on a hard board with Velcro.
- Make a picture of something your child usually requests and wants immediately and back this with Velcro. The next time they ask for the desired item, stick it beside the ‘waiting’ symbol on the board.
- Set the timer for as long as you think they can wait (it may only be 10 seconds for some, or a few minutes for others).
- When the timer goes off, give them the requested item and, say “Thank you for waiting.” Lengthen the time they have to wait and continue to use it regularly before the holiday. Take the ‘waiting’ picture with you on holiday.

On the day you leave, pack a kit to keep everyone entertained on long car rides or if you are stuck in queues. Suggestions for this kit include:

- Familiar snacks and drinks (consider textual needs and sensory sensitivities)
- Communication aids
- Fidget toys
- Engaging activities or distractors
- Reinforcers or rewards.
- Caps for light sensitivities
- Headphones for sound sensitivities

There are some great online holiday directories to help you choose which activities will best suit your family. Here is a list of some national directories to get you started.

Four Corners

<http://www.fourcorners.co.nz/>

Great New Zealand

<http://www.greatnewzealand.co.nz/>

NZ Online <http://www.nzonline.org.nz/>

NZ Tourism Guide

<http://www.tourism.net.nz/region> - search by your region

Travelling by plane

If you are travelling with someone who has not flown before, or is anxious about flying, here are some strategies that may help.

- A visit to the airport before the day of departure is recommended. Contact the airline or airport ahead of time and explain you are travelling with someone who has ASD. Some airlines have special assistance services and this is a good place to start. See if you can go through security as a practice. Explain the luggage drop off and pick up process to your travelling companion, and ask to have this demonstrated if luggage disappearing from sight will cause them distress. You may need to give the airport staff some information about any particular unusual behaviour that might cause alarm or embarrassment, (for example, if your travel companion hand flaps when anxious or excited).
- Create a social story using photos of the airport, the outside and inside of the plane, and the destination airport. Start reading this story well in advance of the day of departure, so that your traveller with ASD can be as prepared as possible.
- You may be able to arrange for your family to check in a little early to avoid queues.
- Ask if there is a quiet area where you can wait to board.
- Request to board first or last, depending on what works best for your family.
- Discuss seating with the airline and select the seat that is most suitable. Often the first and last seats have a little more room, which may have advantages. But check the location of toilets, as these are often at the rear of the plane, which may cause difficulties.
- Let the airline know in advance if there are any special dietary requirements. If you are travelling domestically, you may decide to take your own food; check with the airline if you are travelling internationally as there are restrictions around taking food into other countries.
- Check out the range of airport restaurants and plan which one (if any) will best suit your family.
- Encourage your travel companion with ASD to write or draw a Worry Page, to share their travel concerns with you before you leave home.
- Take noise reduction headphones if sound sensitivities cause distress.
- Make sure you keep essential items in your hand luggage.
- Make sure you have adequate medication for the time you are away, and check if there are any disclosure requirements around these when travelling internationally.
- Carry a recent photo of your travel companion with ASD in case they get lost and you need to identify them. If they are non-verbal, pin an information card to their clothing and include the words 'non-verbal'. Medical bracelets or tags for shoelaces can also be used. ■

- Don't wash any favourite cuddly toys before travelling if this will wash away comforting smells of home.
- Make good use of a travel agent to ensure you know about any special supports for families with disabilities.
- Consider travel insurance if travelling overseas.

Bon voyage!

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PREPARING FOR SCHOOL AFTER THE HOLIDAYS

For some children, the transition back to school at the end of the holidays can be stressful. Here are some tips to help minimize this stress. Throughout the holidays, give your child practice homework (just a little) to keep them in the habit of reading and writing. Then five days before school goes back, start a countdown calendar. Plan an activity each day such as:

Share a Back to School social story with your child, with photos of school and classroom, the teacher and classmates if possible. Prepare your child if they are moving to a new room or have a new teacher.

Try on and wear any new school clothes (including togs and sunhats) and remove any irritating labels. Reacquaint your child with sunscreen if they have spent the summer inside.

Check that school shoes/sandals still fit and practice putting them on and off.

Clean out the pencil case and fill with sharpened or new pencils and pens. For older students, colour-code books and materials for each course. Make sure the schoolbag still fits and is comfortable.

Plan school lunches and practice eating from the school lunch box and drink bottle.

Get your child back into the school routine of going to bed and getting up at the right time.

Practice using toilets and drinking fountains away from home.

Drive past the school, and practice walking up to the gate or up to the classroom if you have access. Spend time in the playground if allowed.

Give your child the option of taking a small calming toy or preferred object (preferably one that other children won't make fun of) to take to school.

Have a quiet day on the last day of the holidays so you are all rested for the new term.

If your child is not looking forward to school, plan an exciting meal or activity for the first afternoon after school so they have something to look forward to.

If your child is anxious, talk to their teacher and share strategies to help with the transition. This is particularly important if your child has a new teacher. ■

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CLASSROOM ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD: TIPS FOR THE NEW TERM

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Why should you consider the needs of students with ASD when setting up your classroom for the New Year? Research has consistently indicated there are benefits in adapting the classroom environment to meet the needs of students with ASD (Hurth, Shaw, Izeman, Whaley & Rogers, 1999). Comprehensive/structured learning environments are one of six core elements empirically supported for effective educational practices for students on the spectrum (Lovanone, Dunlap, Huber & Kincaid, 2003). Qualitative studies of autobiographical texts by authors on the spectrum has highlighted that people with ASD often has sensory sensitivities that cause challenges when processing environmental stimuli. The experience of these authors is that negotiating the sensory geographies requires considerable work, and that their efforts are rarely understood or assisted by those who do not share the same sensitivities (Davidson, 2010). Other research has found that students do better in organized and structured classrooms (Heflin & Alberto, 2001).

Students with the attributes of autism may have difficulty gaining meaning from the classroom activities and/or environment. Defining specific activities to particular areas can help students predict and understand what is expected of them throughout the day. Keeping sensory stimuli to a minimum can also assist students by reducing distractions which allows them to pay attention to the relevant information (Hume, 2007). Students with limited executive function, as is commonly seen with ASD and ADHD, may benefit from a well structured classroom when packing up homework or gathering materials for a class project, as in these cases they are required to pay attention to

both the immediate situation as well as the future outcomes. Low executive function can look like low intelligence, but once executive function is improved your students may be able to complete tasks with greater competency.

So if setting up your classroom for students with ASD in mind is well supported by the research, how should this be done? Kara Hume, PhD, classroom teacher ASD specialist with over 17 year's experience, has identified two key goals when organizing your classroom: create clear physical boundaries; and minimise visual and auditory distractions (Hume, 2007).

Defining specific activities to particular areas can help students predict and understand what is expected of them throughout the day.

Creating clear physical boundaries

This helps students anticipate what will happen in each area

and clarifies your expectations for each activity. Once students learn the appropriate behaviours in each space, the physical environment becomes a powerful cue. Students who are impulsive can more easily learn when to start/stop an activity if there are physical boundaries. These boundaries can include furnishings, but they are not meant to contain students. Your students will need opportunities and time to learn what is expected of them in each space (Hume, 2007). You may need to adjust the boundaries once the children are working within them (or not!) to ensure they are meaningful for your students.

Minimising visual and auditory distractions

While a colourful and busy classroom may be appealing to many students, too much stimulation can be at best distracting and at worst, distressing or even painful for those on the spectrum. Information overload may slow down or even stop cognitive processing. Think about how much information

needs to be on classroom walls or hanging from the ceiling. There may be ways to hang displays so they are out of sight for those easily distracted (Hume, 2007). Patterned furnishings or slatted blinds can capture the attention of students with a fascination for counting or shape recognition, so be aware of floorings or ceilings that may distract from learning. Windows, doors and reflective surfaces may also need to be covered, and students with light sensitivities should be seated away from bright windows. (Some students might wear a cap or glasses with special lenses to minimize bright lights). A rolling room divider can be very useful for separating distracting areas from distractible students. Fluorescent lighting is often painful to the eyes and ears for people with sensory sensitivities. Use soft lighting wherever possible and lights with a dimmer switch can be calming.

Students with ASD may find it hard to filter out background noises. Walk through your classroom and identify any sounds that might interfere with your students' learning. Listen for ticking clocks or dripping taps. How noisy is your computer fan? Seat sound sensitive students away from noisy areas. Soft furnishings or carpet caps can help reduce the scraping of chairs and table legs. Noise blocking

headphones could be considered for students who cannot concentrate due to normal classroom noises; you may need to use simple gestures to communicate with these students when they are wearing their headphones.

Sight and sound are not the only senses that might be overloaded by the classroom environment. Also consider smell (strong perfumes are best avoided!), taste (most commonly seen in food preferences),

touch, body awareness, and balance. While most of the strategies suggested here deal with hyper (over) sensitivity, hypo (under) sensitivities are also common (for example, a child who chews through ipad cases is possibly hypo-sensitive

to oral stimulation). A student may fluctuate between hyper - and hypo-sensitivity. For specific strategies for any of these sensitivities, please contact the research and information team at Altogether Autism.

As teachers, you will know "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism". Each of your students will have individual preferences and peculiarities, so you may find it very helpful to ask their parents/caregivers to complete a behavioural profile checklist to help identify skill strengths and deficits. Contact us for recommended checklists if this would be helpful. But before all this, have a long, well-deserved summer break! ■

Walk through your classroom and identify any sounds that might interfere with your students' learning. Listen for ticking clocks or dripping taps. How noisy is your computer fan? Seat sound sensitive students away from noisy areas.

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