

Preparing for Holiday Visits

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Some families find that anticipating and planning for the holidays is exhilarating and a welcome change from the usual routine. But even the most organized households have reactions to the extra chores and added excitement. The added stress can create distress for children. It's all part of the holiday package.

For families who have a child with special needs, if company's coming, family gatherings and the possible ensuing commotion are enough to generate as much dread as joy. This is especially true if your child reacts to changes in routine or to visitors and is slow to warm up.

Parents can make the most of special occasions and visits throughout the year, whether guests are coming or you're going elsewhere. Your child will benefit from preliminary preparation. She'll want to know, who else will be there? Are there potential playmates? Whatever you do, it's important to smooth the transition for your child with a plan.

- Practice the expected social greetings, such as, "When we arrive, we'll all say hello to our hostess."
- Prepare a book of drawings or photos to show your child what to expect.
- Set practical time limits. Arrive early to acclimate before all the tumult begins; or arrive late to prevent overstimulation.
- Anticipate a problematic reaction and plan for it.
- Be realistic. Adjust idealized expectations.
- Talk to your hostess if your child needs to be approached slowly or a special seating plan at dinner would be best.
- Make an agreement with your partner about sharing responsibility for care so all adults get some time to socialize.
- Anticipate questions from friends and relatives.
- Share "comfortable" information about your child's status.
- Come prepared with a polite response to insensitive or intrusive questions or comments.

Whether your family will be the guests or the hosts, a good plan will prevent disappointments and will enable your child — and you — to enjoy the holiday visit. Remember to overlook the small stuff if you can. This is a day to celebrate and enjoy, as well as to strengthen relationships, not to "just get through."

