

## **Holiday Toolkit**

### **Having a Happy Holiday Takes Preparation**

Susan H. Lizotte, MS,OTR

Homes are being decorated and excitement is in the air as families launch into the Holiday Season. It is a busy month of schedules to shop for and wrap presents, make cookies and traditional meals, and visit family and friends. Our senses are surrounded with visions of lights and people; sounds of music, talking, and laughter; and exposure to changes in schedules, environments, and exposure to crowds and visitors. It's a wonderful time of year but it can also be an assault on our senses, creating stress and overloaded behaviors.

The truth is, sensory overload can happen to anyone. So, what can be done to keep children and family members regulated and able to fully enjoy the holidays? It begins with an awareness of the behavioral signs of stress and sensory overload followed by strategies to prevent and regulate sensory and emotional behaviors before difficulties arise.

#### **Signs of Sensory Overload:**

1. Escalation of behaviors: jumping on furniture, running through the house, "crashing" into people, pushing others, and spinning
2. Sensitivity to sounds: Creating ways to drown out the sound such as covering ears, talking loudly, screaming.
3. Acting aggressively: hitting, pushing, arguing, and biting
4. Meltdowns: Unexpected and heightened frequency of behaviors such as throwing body to the ground, screaming, crying, and being uncooperative
5. Withdrawal or avoidance behaviors: refusal to join in activities or transitions.

#### **Strategies to prepare and regulate children for a holiday gathering:**

1. **Create a visual schedule:** Provide a visual schedule to prepare children for the types of sensory experiences they are about to have. Include the big details of the event, including dressing up for the get together, the commute to the event, expected activities and the friends/family that the child will get a chance to play with.
2. **Help orient to the new space.** Take a tour of the new environment, pointing out the bathroom, a quiet room and a play space. If you are familiar with the venue prior to arrival, review the space and decide areas that may be good choices to play or visit (play room, quiet sunroom).

3. **If auditory sensitivities occur, provide head phones or ear plugs** to help dampen the sounds in his environment and enjoy some favorite music or books on tape.
4. Holiday parties are full of different foods to explore. While it would be nice to explore new foods, be prepared to prevent hunger pains by eating a snack before the party and bringing a preferred snack if possible.
5. **Dress comfortably.** Dressing for special occasions is typical during the holidays but consider a collaborative alternative. Allow the child to choose his holiday outfit based on preferences and tolerable textures or agree on an outfit to change into after settled into the party and pictures are taken. Feeling comfortable is the ultimate goal, especially if tactile sensitivities are a problem.
6. **Provide opportunities for movement breaks as needed.** Encourage gross motor play earlier in the day to provide the input that is needed prior to attending a holiday gathering. Be aware of the need for movement breaks such as going outside for a short walk, playing a game, or dancing.
7. **Rest:** Provide time for rest before a large group gathering. Read a book together, have a comforting drink and light snack as you cuddle and talk about the party. Play soft music and encourage rest.
8. **Overwhelming smells:** Often overlooked is the bombardment of smells such as foods, candles, and perfume. Allow child to bring a comforting item from home such as a blanket or stuffed animal to cuddle and buffer the smells. Seek a space that has reduced sensory input to regulate before returning to the gathering.
9. **Greeting Guests & Relatives:** Greetings between people are often expressed with hugs, kisses, or handshakes. This is especially the case for festive occasions between people who have not seen each other for some time. This bombardment of affection and tactile input can be overwhelming for children. Talking to your children in advance to prepare them and/or determine a preferred greeting will be helpful to balance the teaching of etiquette with honoring effective sensory regulation.