

Looking for support over the Christmas Period

Christmas can be a difficult time for some families – and it can be hard to know who to contact over the festive period if you are in need of some advice, support or information. Some organisations – like Parent Voice close their offices for the entire festive period (22nd December until 2nd of January) and others run a reduced service or adjust their helplines opening times.

Although helplines may be closed if you are just looking for information it may still be possible to find this by visiting an organisations website. Sometimes these organisations also have on-line forums so it may be possible to get in touch with other parents and carers.

The **Citizen’s Advice Bureau’s** website contains lots of useful information and advice on a wide variety of subjects such as money matters, relationships, education and legal advice; <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>. Local branches have their own individual opening hours and times and so yours may be open over the festive period - to find your local branch click here: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/how-we-provide-advice/advice/search-for-your-local-citizens-advice/?q>.

If you are struggling to cope with the debts and money after or in the run up to Christmas – the Citizen’s Advice Bureau have produced a really good short guide:

https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/Migrated_Documents/corporate/top-ten-tips-for-christmas.pdf

We hope that the following information will help you to find support when and if you need it over Christmas and the New Year.

Organisation	Christmas Opening Hours	Contact Information (including regular opening times)	
		Telephone	Website
Samaritans	Open 24 hours a day over Christmas	116 123 (Free call line)	http://www.samaritans.org/ Christmas help - https://www.samaritans.org/search/node/christmas
Carers Listening Line	Open 365 days a year 9.00am - 8.00pm	08000 3 23456 (answering service in operation if lines are engaged)	http://782186386632763965.weebly.com/
Family Lives	Christmas Eve – open Closed – 25 th , 26 th , 27 th Dec and 1 st Jan. New Year’s Eve – 10 – 3pm	0808 800 2222 (confidential free* helpline open 9am – 9pm, Monday to Friday and 10am – 3pm Saturday and Sunday.	http://forum.familylives.org.uk/forum/ Christmas help - http://www.familylives.org.uk/search/?searchType=phrase&keywords=christmas+&siid=19
Sane	Open over the Christmas	0300 304 7000 (local cost call)	http://www.sane.org.uk/home

	period 4.30 – 10.30pm		Text Care - http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/textcare/
Mencap	Closed 25 th , 26 th Dec, 1 st Jan. 9 – 5pm – 27 th , 28 th , 29 th Dec, 2 nd Jan.	0808 808 1111 (from 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday) *Please note the Helpline is always closed over the weekend*	https://www.mencap.org.uk/
SCOPE	Weekdays 10 – 4pm closed 24 th , 25 th , 26 th , 31 st Dec and 1 st Jan	0808 800 3333	http://www.scope.org.uk/ or their online community can be found at: https://community.scope.org.uk/

The following organisations will be closed on or from the 22nd of December 2015 until the 2nd of January 2017.

Organisation	Christmas Opening Hours	Contact Information (including regular opening times)	
		Telephone	Website
Contact	Closed 22 nd – 2 nd Jan	0808 808 3555 (Freephone 9.30am-5pm, Monday-Friday)	http://www.cafamily.org.uk/
Young Minds	Closed 22 nd Dec – 2 nd Jan	0808 802 5544 (9:30 am – 4pm Monday to Friday)	http://www.youngminds.org.uk/ Christmas help - https://youngminds.org.uk/search-results/?terms=christmas
Cerebra	Closed 22 nd – 2 nd Jan	0800 043 9385 (9:30 am – 4pm Monday to Friday)	http://w3.cerebra.org.uk/
IPSEA	Closed 22 nd – 2 nd Jan	Phone appointments must be booked	https://www.ipsea.org.uk/home https://www.ipsea.org.uk/contact/advice-and-support/advice-line
Coram	Closed 22 nd – 2 nd Jan	Family law: 0300 3305480 Education law: 0300 3305485 (Monday - Friday 8am to 6pm)	http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com/

Top Tips for Managing the Festive Period

Christmas can be a very difficult time for children and young people – there are changes to normal routines, shops and other places are busier and more crowded than usual, decorations and lights appear everywhere, there are different sights and smells and on top of all this there is the idea of Santa or visiting Santa's grotto. For a child or young person with a learning disability all these things can be potential sources of confusion, anxiety or sensory overload. The following tips – from parents and carers – can help to make things easier in the run up to Christmas Day, on the day itself and in the period up to the New Year.

The most important thing is to offer lots of praise your child/young person is trying to cope with lots of very stressful things that they find confusing and difficult to manage – so it's essential that you let them know when they have done well and focus on the specifics.

Plan, Plan, Plan

- **Plan the holidays:** having plans in place can help you to feel more relaxed.
- **What are your coping strategies:** just because it's Christmas doesn't mean that you have to change the way you manage stressful situations – if something works for you or your child/young person use it.
- **Prepare your child/young person:** visual timetables, pictures, photographs, objects and social stories can all be useful tools to help prepare your child/young person. Talk to them – find out what they think about Christmas and what they like doing and try to build this in to a routine for them.
- **Print off a week-to-view calendar:** and add in pictures of your planned activities during the during the Christmas holidays (divide into morning, lunch, evening etc). This will help your child to know exactly what will be happening and when.
- **Roll with it:** sometimes things won't go according to the plan – don't let this become a source of stress – have a back-up plan or work with what is happening rather than against it.
- **Make a Christmas book:** put in pictures of your child and your family doing different Christmassy things – put in picture for anything Christmas related such as decorating the tree or things that you know you will be doing. It will make things seem more familiar.

Christmas "Down-time" and preparation for the big day

- **Schedule at least 10 minutes per day:** where your child/young person has your undivided attention. Make sure that this time is "Christmas-free" – read a story, play a game or ask your child/young person what they would like to do during this time.
- **Create a Christmas Free Zone:** this is a safe area in your house where your child/young person can retreat to if it is all getting too much. If you are visiting friends or relatives over the Christmas period – talk to them and see if it is possible to have a "Christmas free" space at their house.
- **Decorations in bedrooms:** if your child/young person cannot cope with any changes in the house encourage your other children to decorate their own bedrooms. This means that they won't miss out and potentially feel resentful or upset.

- **Gradually introduce different smells:** the strong smells associated with Christmas can be difficult for children and young people with autism or sensory processing disorders to handle. Gradually introduce these smells – perhaps by adding them to playdoh or putting a small amount in the Hoover filter so that it lightly scents the air. If you are having people over ask them if they would mind avoiding wearing perfumes and aftershaves – which can become overpowering especially in groups of people.
- **Wrapping Paper Play:** give wrapping paper to your child to play with ahead of Christmas, cut and tear etc., so that they get comfortable with the noise and look of it.
- **Make your own:** it can be great fun to make your own wrapping paper as a family – use brown paper and decorate with anything from stamps, drawings, glitter, pictures. This will also help presents to seem more familiar on Christmas day.
- **Talk about it:** many children don't like surprises – start talking to your child about Christmas early and make sure they can prepare for the expected and unexpected.
- **Help and encourage your child to give gifts:** helping to make gifts for family and friends or be involved in buying gifts for people can help your child to understand what is happening. They can also look forward to giving out their special gifts and may help them to understand what receiving a gift from a loved one means (if they find opening gifts difficult).
- **Deck the halls:** when your child is awake – and involve them as much as possible in decorating. Try to gradually introduce decorations e.g. introduce the Christmas lights through sensory play.
- **Oh Christmas Tree:** decorate the tree with items that have different textures, smells and sounds – it will make the tree a more sensory experience and if your child has a visual impairment they will enjoy it more too!

Managing Present Mountain!

- **Borrow toys from a Toy Library:** to find out if your child/young person would be able to play with a toy, or if a toy is suitable developmentally or if they would enjoy playing with a particular type of toy see if you can borrow this from a toy library. To find your local toy library at <http://www.netmums.com/local-to-you/local/index/indoor-play/toy-libraries>
- **Prep the gift:** make sure all the packaging is removed – particularly the annoying plastic ties – make sure any batteries are in, and that it is set up to be used as soon as it is unwrapped. This prep work can make a huge difference between the new thing being accepted or rejected.
- **Alternative gifts:** a present for a child doesn't necessarily have to be a toy – children can play with and get enjoyment from a number of different things – helium balloons are almost always a winner for example.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for a contribution to an item:** it can be difficult to find age-appropriate presents that are also suitable for a child or young person's ability and development. If you know of an item that would be really beneficial to your child/young person's development don't be afraid to ask for a contribution towards this – this will avoid the awkwardness of explaining to someone why what they've bought isn't suitable or why your child/young person broke it.
- **Too much to unwrap:** children and young people can find a mountain of gifts to unwrap overwhelming and unwrapping presents and opening lots of new things can create anxiety and confusion. Therefore a single present or a couple of presents can be easier to manage. Ask relatives to contribute to one gift or space the opening of gifts over a number of days. It doesn't matter if your child/young person is still opening their presents in to the New Year!

- **Wrap up the familiar:** it can help to wrap up some loved familiar toys for your child to unwrap on Christmas morning. Unwrapping the familiar can be quite relaxing and easier to cope with.
- **Alternative Wrapping:** paper wrapped presents using sellotape can be difficult to open – and some children do not like the noise of the feel of ripping open gifts. Try wrapping presents in foil – which is easier to open and provides a sensory experience. You could also wrap them in material tied up with a ribbon which again is easier to open and a less challenging.
- **'Doctor' wrapping:** if your child or young person has difficulty with fine motor tasks make their presents easier to open (in advance) – it will make them feel much happier to have opened their own gift and give a sense of satisfaction that they managed to do it.
- **Get some sparkles:** presents wrapped in sparkly paper - gold, in particular, or anything with a rainbow/prism effect can be better if your child has a visual impairment as it is naturally more eye catching.
- **Don't be afraid to give it away:** if your child/young person doesn't like opening presents because they aren't comfortable with the unknown – tell them what's inside. Don't focus on the idea that the surprise has been spoiled – if it makes them happier to know what the present is – they will enjoy opening it and playing with it more.

Siblings need Christmas too!

- **Create Christmas for siblings:** your child/young person's sibling/s may find Christmas really difficult to understand. When they go to friends' houses Christmas may be in full swing whilst in your house it may feel to them as if Christmas doesn't exist. Try and make time for Christmas activities with them every day even if it is just for a short while. Don't be afraid to ask friends and relatives to help you with this so that you can do fun things with them like going to school plays, visits to Santa's grotto or carol singing.
- **Decorate their rooms:** help them to bring Christmas to their bedroom if they cannot have this in other areas of the house.

Coping with Visitors or Visiting others over Christmas

- **Make it familiar:** if you are going to be having groups of people over – start small and make this a regular feature e.g. have a group of people come over to your house once a week. Build visitors in to visual time-tables and social stories.
- **Talk to people in advance:** if you're visiting people over Christmas or if you have people coming to you – talk to them. Tell them about what you might be feeling worried or anxious about. It will help you to feel more comfortable and relaxed - and – people are often more supportive and understanding if they know what to expect.
- **Let people know about how your son/daughter might react:** if you know that your son/daughter might need some quiet time then let people know this, if they would prefer gifts not to be wrapped then tell your guests in advance and if you know that they won't feel comfortable being asked to hug people then share this with your guests. Don't be afraid to be upfront and explain to people that you are trying to make Christmas work for the whole family.
- **Share coping strategies:** let guests know that things might be adapted a little to help your son/daughter enjoy the day too. If child/young person finds meal times difficult then let people know that they might be sitting where they are comfortable at dinner time. If you

child/young person sometimes needs time out then let visitors know that this may happen during the day.

- **Pack a back pack:** if you're visiting people over Christmas or on Christmas Day it can help to take a back pack with you filled with your child/young person's favourite things. This will provide them with some comfort if they get over stimulated.
- **Keep it Simple!:** If you're having friends and family over – keep things as simple as possible. If you're getting stressed – your child will pick up on this and it will make them feel anxious. It isn't necessary to have a roast dinner with all the trimmings at Christmas time– and it really won't matter if you don't have one!
- **Encourage people to help themselves:** putting food onto large plates/ bowls and letting the family help themselves avoids people having the “wrong” foods on their plate – which can be stressful and off putting for some children and young people.
- **Give small jobs:** if you have people over and your child is able to – give them small jobs to do such as taking coats or offering nibbles. Giving them a job to do will help them to feel more relaxed, like they are part of things and make them feel proud that they have helped. If you can give them a plan for the day so that they know what will be happening and when then it will help them to understand and feel more secure.
- **Consistency:** again just because its Christmas doesn't mean you have to change the ways you cope with things. Respond to situations as you normally would and if you are visiting people or have people visiting you tell them how you manage or cope with certain behaviours. Make sure that they respond to things in the way that you would like them too!
- **Ignore well-meaning 'advice':** it will only make you feel stressed - **YOU** know best what your child needs, and providing it is your responsibility. Try and stay focused on your child.