

The 12 Anxieties of Christmas

Introduction

As hinted within the “12 Days of Christmas” the festive season is supposed to be a time of fun, joy, families and surprises. Many will over indulge following the initial rush of Christmas spirit in the morning and then vegetate in front of the television watching James Bond. However, such a scenario is not conducive for children with certain special needs, especially Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The chaos that ensues from changes in routine added to the growing anticipation can be a recipe for stress and behaviour problems for all involved. So what can be done to reduce some of these difficulties? Following contributions from many parents, and in no particular order, a new version of the 12 Days will now be laid out before you exploring these problems. Subsequently, the LIME Magazine and I proudly presents:

“THE 12 ANXIETIES OF CHRISTMAS”

Decorations

Whether at school or home, for many the first sign of tinsel or a bauble going up is the moment Christmas commences along with anxiety levels that hit Defcon 1 in intensity and difficulties. In many families this will have been preceded by the inevitable countdown following the passing of Halloween and Bonfire Night. I even know of some families that have had to purchase two trees as one has died by the middle of December. When you decorate your house for Christmas for many children with special needs it becomes a different house. So what can we do to reduce some of the impact that decorations have on the situation.

Try and include them as much as you can in the preparation of the event. You may want to take them shopping for the tree and decorations, they could even choose their own decoration for the tree. If you do not need any more decorations then show your child

where they are kept in the house before you bring them out for the holiday. This will help your child to become familiar with these items, even if they saw them the year before. Also put decorations up gradually whilst your child is around as it can be extremely unsettling for them if they should return from school to find the whole house decorated. Where possible involve your child in putting up the decorations, even if they are just in the room when it occurs. It may be useful to keep decorations in one room, "The Christmas Room", so that the rest of the house remains the same for your child and also provides a specific area for the big day. Such approaches will prevent any negative reactions to these new items being placed in a familiar environment.

Christmas tree

Although briefly discussed in the previous section, having a Christmas tree is often a major issue in itself. Consider any major changes that may need to be made such as moving furniture or other things. If so, rather than make all the changes at once, move the items out one day and then put the tree up the next day. This is not the end of it; remember your child may need to know exactly how the tree will be decorated and how the lights will be placed upon it. Consider involving the child in the decorating activity and take it in turns putting the ornaments and tinsel on whilst gaining guidance as to how the lights should be placed. Ensure pride of place for any favourite or special ornaments, especially those handmade decorations. Chocolates on the tree maybe a forbidden practise, especially if previous experience shows that anxiety levels go up whilst it is known that there is a certain amount on the tree. Maybe consider putting a chocolate on the tree each day for your child to find or have the chocolates put away for you to give them the chocolate rather than searching for them. Finally it may be useful to build into any timetable the removal of the tree so that your child can prepare for a return to normality.

Advent Calendars

Just imagine a purpose made countdown to Christmas Day with a daily reward system that you do not have to make yourself. Hey Presto, we have one in the form of advent calendars. However for many children with ASD this is simply not enough as it only indicates the amount of days but no additional events. Consequently, depending upon your child, an alternative calendar highlighting not just the actual holiday but also when the school term ends and starts again. This period of time could be named "Christmas Time. Highlighting this on the calendar will help your child to prepare for the time spent away from school, and therefore the change in routine. You can start talking to your child about 'Christmas Time' and what this means, utilising whatever methods are best for your situation. In addition, you can mark the days that you will buy and put up the Christmas tree and decorations, as well as any other changes which will occur, including the arrival of relatives and friends.

Christmas Presents

The joy of giving, receiving and unwrapping presents followed by the surprised look on the child's face or the neutral response from adults trying to hide the disappointment in receiving the 12th pair of socks. Unfortunately these are probably not the views of present giving that you would have experienced with your child who has special needs. In fact the issue of Christmas presents is full of anxiety including; needing to know what the presents are before unwrapping them so there are no surprises, and social graces involved with receiving presents.

So how do you relieve the stress off of the first event of the day? The unknown, unplanned aspect of presents is often a large stress inducing element and can be extremely overwhelming for the child with special needs. Consider taking pictures of the presents unwrapped and then use this picture as the gift tag for the present so your child knows what to expect. It can be useful to stagger the opening of presents to avoid over-stimulation of your child, although this can be difficult for any siblings to comprehend. When others are

picking presents make a list of all the presents that your child will like and if buying clothing then ask the person to look at clothes relating to your child's special interest. If possible, and if your child has issues with new clothes, then ask to have the clothing in advance so that it can be washed a few times to get that "just new feeling" out of them. Consider wrapping the present up in paper that has images of your child's special interest, not necessarily Christmas paper, as a way to differentiate the presents from everyone else's and to make them more acceptable to your child. Do not worry if your child only focuses upon one toy that maybe connected to their special interest. Slowly introduce new toys over the Christmas period, and even remove one toy that they having stopped playing with to another room to reduce the conflicts involved with competing toy interests.

In relation to the social graces of present accepting, if there are issues during the rest of the year for your child then it is no different at Christmas. If your child is likely to not say thank you, make a rude comment about the present, throw it on the floor, lose their temper when being hugged, etc then warn friends and families. Tell others how to respond and not to take any comments personally. Work with your child to be prepared for the events ahead. Use Social Stories and Role Play to develop the skills, or develop a schedule for your child in relation to meeting and greeting people. If, however, that embarrassing moment of stark refusal by your child occurs then have an explanation ready in advance and move on.

Shopping

For many the issue of going shopping is highly stressful at the best of times. At Christmas time this worsens. Not only is there extra noise, sights and smells associated with this time of year, there is also the constant anxiety as the build up to the big day increase with each passing moment. For many this is all just too much. You may have to consider **NOT** taking your child shopping at this time and allow times every day for them to 'chill out' and be alone and quiet.

For those times that it is necessary to take your child shopping, it maybe a necessity to pre-prepare them in relation to why things are so different such as WHY do the shops start

selling Christmas items in September???) So consider using social stories to help your child understand this madness that is happening around them.

Turn Taking

In relation to Christmas, turn taking is not just about opening presents it is also about playing games, watching DVDs, etc. The approach to turn taking is no different to everyday turn taking and requires practising prior to the big day. There are a range of approaches available, including practicing using board games, etc, which can be used to help your child deal with the difficulties relating to turn taking. Only you will know which is most appropriate for your situation. In the meantime often using number cards to decide whose turn it is to open presents can help the situation, or alternatively opening up presents simultaneously with their siblings can be as effective.

Christmas Dinner

When your child has big issues with food it can be the most stressful part of Christmas as the pressure is on for the family to sit all together. During the run up to Christmas, consider talking with your child about the different types of food that might be present on the big day and involve them in preparing their menu for the day. If possible, give your child the opportunity to try out some of the new or less frequently cooked food prior to the day.

On the day, yes it would be wonderful for you all to be sat at the table for Christmas Dinner, however to many children with special needs this may not happen. They may see it as just another meal time but with more people that add to their stress levels, especially if they do not normally sit at the table or eat this particular food the rest of the year. So do not stress yourselves about this and if necessary cook old faithfuls like chicken nuggets, pizza, etc that your child normally eats which they then eat in their normal way. If you dress up your table

for Christmas, remember this is a change to the norm, so consider ensuring one part of the table is kept “normal” for your child so that it is familiar to them. Finally Christmas Crackers!!!! To some children with special needs, very small fireworks and bangers. If this causes difficulties, then consider using them when your child has left the dinner table and room, or remove the banger part (although a little unfair to other children in the family).

Family & Friend Visits

Christmas time seems to be when all sorts of family and friends come out of the woodwork and visit or request your presence in their home. Approach this in the same way as you would normally. It may be Christmas but your child will not necessarily appreciate that as a reason for the visiting. Consequently ensure that you have prepared your child prior to any visit. Ensure that they are fully aware as to who they will see and be definite about how long the visit will be, and stick to the arrangement even if it cuts a good time short. Remember by not keeping to the arrangements the good time could deteriorate into pandemonium very quickly that last far beyond that time. During the visit, whether it is to someone’s house or them coming to you, ensure that your child has a dedicated space or room that they can retreat to when things get too much for them, ensuring that they do not get interrupted by others. If necessary have a sign for your child to utilise that indicates no one should interrupt them. Finally ensure that your child has favourite toys or games with them to play with during the visit.

Father Christmas

Probably the biggest contradiction in any child’s life, but especially those with special needs. You spend all year teaching your child the social limits of not talking to or hugging strangers and then expect them to join in with the tradition of Father Christmas. How confusing it must be to suddenly be encouraged to break the rules for a loud, cheery man dressed in red whose face is obscured by a bushy white beard. Simultaneously we expect them to cope

with scientific boundaries that breach fact, such as one man travelling around the world in one night giving presents to all the girls and boys. Is it any wonder that problems arise such as confusion, anxiety, not “believing” in this man and frustrations with siblings/peers who do believe.

Many children with special needs will undoubtedly worry about the whole concept whether it is to do with meeting a stranger dressed in red, or that stranger “breaking in” to the house. Prepare your child by explaining what Father Christmas does and the subsequent rewards. Use visual aids and Social Stories if needed. Add structure to meeting the man himself, including gradual introductions, and put in boundaries for both Father Christmas and your child should they meet. What about if your child does not believe in Father Christmas (**he really does exist, honest!!!**) help your child understand that other people do believe and to attempt to accept this difference. Once again use visual methods to help or get them to talk with others in a calm and structured way about the issue. Finally, should your child need a countdown on Christmas Eve in relation to how long it will be before Father Christmas arrives, then the USA Norad Santa tracker site (www.noradsanta.org) site is a good and fun visual way of achieving this.

School Plays/Christmas Activities/Fayres

Check when the school starts work about Christmas, and perhaps you could introduce the idea at a similar time. This will help to ensure consistency. However, if this time frame does not leave enough preparation time for your child, then you should adjust it as appropriate. When it comes to Christmas Fayres consider whether it is really necessary for your child to attend when frequently Christmas Fayres are crowded, noisy and full of people trying to buy or win that present so that schools can raise money. I do know of some special needs schools that have postponed the Christmas Fayre until the Spring to avoid the extra stress. In relation to School Plays and Carol Concerts, the impact on your child can, although not always, depend upon whether they are at a mainstream school or special needs school. Whichever one, it is important that the school takes into consideration the stress involved

for the child when faced with a crowd of unfamiliar faces staring at them whilst they are encouraged to perform or sit for an extended period of time. This is in addition to the stress linked to having that starring role in the performance which they have to practise. Be prepared to talk to the school about limiting and even removing your child from the performance if it is felt that your child will experience high stress levels.

Meltdown

As any parent or caregiver of an autistic child knows, things go really bad when routines go out the window. Simple changes can be the hardest things in the world for autistic children to cope with so all the changes that come with Christmas complicate their worlds even worse. First and foremost, be prepared for the inevitable meltdown. If it does not happen then enjoy the celebrations and never question why. However, remember Christmas is as difficult on them as it is you, so it is important that you give them more time, more patience, whatever, within reason, it is they need to come through the holidays. Begin by remembering change is hard for them. Do things a little at a time, don't pack all the holiday stuff into just a couple of days, which leave them stressed and worn out (not to mention yourselves from coping with meltdowns.) Giving your child some advanced notice and showing them pictures of last year's Christmas can help with the adjustment. Being a parent to a special needs child can be difficult, but being that special needs child is even more difficult.

Last but by no means least helping you Cope with the Pressure of Christmas

So you have done your best to provide some coping mechanisms for your child to deal with Christmas but how about you. Firstly be realistic in your own expectations about the whole day. Preparing for Christmas is a stressful experience at the best of times, but in the realms of special needs this stress is increased further. Although easy to say it, try and make time

for you during the events, ask a family member or friend to assist and give you a break. Try to prepare not just for your child but also for the day in general so that the need to split yourself between the needs of the day and the needs of your child is reduced. Such planning can then reduce the impact of any meltdowns your child may have. Remember its only one day out of the year, but it is us who put the emphasis upon its importance. Try and keep your sense of humour in close proximity throughout Christmas, it is a time of celebration.

Finally, I hope that the ideas provided within this article will provide some assistance for you toward your Christmas and on behalf of The Lime Magazine and Special Help 4 Special Needs I wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a very Happy and Prosperous New Year.