

Holiday Survival Guide for Families with Special Needs

Brought to you by AbilityPath.org



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Organization Overview:

AbilityPath.org is a unique online community for professionals and parents of children with special needs that combines social networking features with expert content from AbilityPath's team of educators, parents, therapists and medical professionals. Content is available in English and Spanish and features advice, tool kits and other practical day to day living tips so families can learn, laugh and live a more balanced life. AbilityPath's community blogs, forums, events and groups allow parents to connect and share experiences and stories, providing an outlet of support and encouragement throughout their parenting journey.

Mission:

Building a community that brings together professionals and parents of children with special needs from around the globe to learn, share and strengthen the process of supporting the ongoing healthy development of children and youth with special needs and disabilities.

AbilityPath.org was created by Community Gatepath, a nonprofit with over 90 years of experience serving families and children with special needs. Community Gatepath fosters hope, dignity and independence among children and adults with disabilities. It is one of the largest providers of services for people with disabilities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Over 8,500 individuals annually receive support or direct care through Community Gatepath and its comprehensive menu of services including: childhood early intervention, a Family Resource Center, inclusive preschool, transition for young adults services, employment services and social business enterprises.



Whatever holiday traditions you celebrate, the season of gift-giving is upon us, which means the annual quest for the perfect presents has begun again.

This task can be daunting for any family, but parents of children with special needs face distinct challenges. On one hand, gifts for these children must possess the same key characteristic as gifts for neurotypical kids; they must be fun. On the other hand, the gifts need to be age and ability appropriate, and should elicit communication and motor skills improvement across the board.

We recently sat down with a group of AbilityPath therapists to review toys and spotlight which products work well. Here are the best of the best, all priced under \$49, with details on each (hint - none requires batteries).

VEHICLES CHUNKY WOODEN PUZZLE

WHAT IT DOES: Hand-painted, playfully styled puzzle has chunky wooden pieces in the shapes of vehicles.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Sure, this puzzle is fun to take apart and put together, but the real fun begins when parents use pieces individually as characters in imaginary play. "The more your child can interact with the toy—or use the toy as a way to interact with you—the better for everyone involved," said pediatric speech-language pathologist Angie Marshall.

- Can be purchased for \$8.92 at Amazon.com

"B IS FOR BEAR" BOOK

WHAT IT DOES: Oversized, picture-oriented board book is a great way to learn letters, textures and words.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Early childhood special education teacher Nicole Longa says attention to detail is what makes this Roger Priddy book worthwhile. First, from a practical perspective, the pages are durable, so kids can't destroy them. Next, there's only one picture per page, encouraging kids to devote their entire attention to the information at hand. Finally, of course, are built-in sensory components such as faux fur for dogs.

- Can be purchased for \$10.36 at Amazon.com



SOLID DRUM

WHAT IT DOES: Plan Toy's simple wooden drum includes a drumstick with a rubber head to soften sound.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Music is a great way to share knowledge, and this drum certainly facilitates that. Early childhood special educator Mariella Knutson, says that drums are good because they don't require coordination to operate successfully. "I also like to do 'go' and 'stop,'" she says in which an adult sets the example by pounding on the drum as "go" and then yells "stop" with the child mimicking. This play helps set other "go" and "stop" expectations such as crossing a street or running outside. "The whole notion of turn-taking teaches them a lot more about how to interact with others."

- Can be purchased for \$17.24 at Amazon.com



OBALL 3 IN 1

WHAT IT DOES: Oball's squishable and bendable balls are full of finger holes for easy grabbing. Sold in a package of three.

WHY IT'S GOOD: According to lead therapist and education coordinator Pooja Maniar Doshi, the eminently grabbable Oballs are perfect for kids who have trouble with motor skills. "It might take one of these kids five minutes to release the ball, but the fact that they can grab it is very exciting," Doshi adds that many parents add sensory components, such as apple sauce or whipped cream inside.

- Can be purchased for \$9.99 at Amazon.com

CLICK-CLACK TRACK

WHAT IT DOES: Early Learning Centre's toy provide descending tracks for wooden cars to zoom toward floor.



WHY IT'S GOOD: What kid doesn't like a car toy? Therapists including Knutson and Kemper like this imported product because parents can watch their children through it, guaranteeing interaction at every turn. Another benefit for children with autism is there's plenty of space between tracks, so parents can use a finger to block the path of the car, and with the obstruction teach children about reacting to changes from their normal repetitions.

- Can be purchased for \$39.99 at Sears.com



SORTING BUS

WHAT IT DOES: Wooden pull-toy shape-sorter is in the form of a bus; by pulling on a sign, kids can "dump" shapes out of the back.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Essentially, this is two toys in one. Marshall suggests parents start by taking away the sorting shapes, letting children focus on simply pulling the toy first. As children gain confidence, and motor skills, she advises that parents present them with the shapes for an entirely different experience. "It'll be like a new toy all over again," she says.

- Can be purchased for \$28.00 at Amazon.com



CUTTING FOOD BOX

WHAT IT DOES: This Melissa & Doug toy contains eight pieces of wooden food, a cutting board and a wooden knife. "Uncut" food is held together by Velcro.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Don't let the presence of a dull knife scare you. This toy is great for teaching kids about manipulating food. Early intervention programs manager and occupational therapist Michelle Kemper, says parents can use the toy to help kids practice muscle control, sharing and more. "It presents a perfectly controlled environment in which kids can learn how to use a knife," she states. Another great use - play picnics.

• Can be purchased for \$17.50 at [Amazon.com](#)

STACK & ROLL CUPS

WHAT IT DOES: Fisher Prices cups include ten different colored cups for stacking, nesting and creative play. Also comes with a jingle ball that fits inside any cup or on top of a whole stack.



WHY IT'S GOOD: "The sky's the limit with this toy," says early childhood special education teacher Nicole Longa. Kids can roll, stack, nest, shake, rattle and drink (pretend, of course) from the cups. During therapy sessions, she also stuffs scarves into one of the cups and pulls them out gradually, like a magician. "Parents see toys as serving one purpose," she notes. "That doesn't always have to be the case."

• Can be purchased for \$11.40 at [Amazon.com](#)

DUPLO BASIC BRICKS



WHAT IT DOES: Safe-plastic Legos blocks are a large-scale variation on classic Legos.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Regular Legos are too small for young kids, but Duplo blocks are bigger, making them ideal for children with below-average motor skills. Pediatric speech-language pathologist Angie Marshall MA, CCC-SLP adds that while neurotypical

children might turn to some blocks to play independently, these blocks work well as the centerpiece of interactive play.

• Can be purchased for \$55.00 at [Amazon.com](#)

SUPER SPIRAL PLAY TOWER

WHAT IT DOES: Safe-plastic toy from iplay comprises Weeble-like critters that race down a spiral tower into staging area.

WHY IT'S GOOD: There's a lot going on with this toy, but Knutson notes that parents can control how many pieces kids get, making it interactive in all the right ways. "Once you have them playing, if you limit the number of pieces you are forcing them to interact with, you engage them that much more," she says. "Parents fail to realize they are the gatekeepers of their kids' toys."



• Can be purchased for \$27.39 at [Amazon.com](#)

Things To Consider About Toys

Giving toys to children with special needs presents parents with a unique set of challenges. Here are some things to consider:

BUY THE BEST. The best toys for children with special needs usually are the ones that have been deemed so by the Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, an independent guide to children's media. Each of these toys receives special distinction as a Special Needs Adaptable Product, or SNAP. "I've never met an Oppenheim-award [winning toy] I didn't like," says early intervention programs manager and occupational therapist Michelle Kemper. "Especially the ones with the SNAP stamp of approval."

READ THE LABEL. Research the manufacturer of your toy or what materials were used to manufacture it; especially when buying plastic toys. Toy manufacturers report recalls everyday based on cheaply made items that may contain lead or other harmful elements. Any plastic toy that is dishwasher safe, PVC, Latex and Phthalates free will be best.

LESS IS MORE. Though you likely have the urge to shower your children with gifts during the holiday season, it's important to remember that when it comes to toys (especially educational toys) less is more. Fewer toys mean fewer distractions, enabling children with special needs to focus more significantly on the toys at hand. Early childhood special educator Mariella Knutson, says it's perfectly acceptable for parents to remove older toys from the toy chest to guarantee their children aren't overwhelmed.

MINIMIZE WRAPPING. It's important to give children with special needs the same gift-opening experiences as everyone else. Keep in mind, however, that it physically may be difficult for these kids to open tightly wrapped gifts. Instead, pediatric speech-language pathologist Angie Marshall, suggests wrapping presents loosely, with no more than two or three pieces of tape. Another option is dropping gifts in bags with lots of tissue paper.

SHOP AROUND. We've provided links to where you can purchase these toys online at [Amazon.com](#). You also can find them in many local toy and department stores. Community Gatepath therapists say some of the best shopping is at places such as Ross, Marshall's and T.J. Maxx. "Every place has good buys," says early childhood special education teacher Nicole Longa. You just need to be a smart consumer."

The holiday season is upon us, and for many parents, that means searching for the perfect toys for their children. AbilityPath.org reached out to bloggers of children with special needs looking for their top toy picks to help make your Holiday shopping easy for children 6 and up!



The toys that made our list are favorites in homes across the country, and will surely put a smile on your child's face this holiday season! Be sure to also check out our Holiday Toy Guide for children ages 0-6 for more great gift ideas for your little ones.



STORYLAND YOGA BY AHMED FAHMY

WHAT IT DOES: Storyland Yoga is a fun-filled adventure that infuses children with an eco-conscious message. Two unique stories, "Save the Whale" and "Condor Trek" engage a child's imagination through storytelling. Kid's learn yoga postures by becoming part of the story and imitating animals.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Kirsten Howerthorn, blogger and professor of psychology, recommended Storyland Yoga as a great gift for children who struggle with sensory processing, hyperactivity, or difficulty with focusing. "At the surface, Storyland Yoga is a fun, interactive story that gets children off their feet and involved in the narrative. But as kids are playing long, they are also learning valuable relaxation poses and breathing techniques to help calm their bodies and minds," she said.

- For Ages 3 to 8
- Can be purchased for \$14.99 on Amazon.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Kristen Howerton, a mom of four and part-time professor of psychology. She blogs at Rage Against the Minivan.

COLOR MUSIC SYSTEM BY MICHAEL SOUDERS

WHAT IT DOES: Alternate music notations for children and adults with special needs using shapes and colors to match keys to the melody.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Blogger Shannon Flora

believes the Color Music System for keyboard or piano is ideal for a special needs child because it helps them with recognizing their colors and shapes at same time they enjoy music as well as reading and matching music melodies.

- For Children and Adults
- Can be purchased for \$35.00 at: <http://www.restored.faithweb.com/colormusic.html>

RECOMMENDED BY: Shannon Flora, a mother of four children who Blogs at: Shannon's Tales of Motherhood.

LARGE FARM JUMBO KNOB PUZZLE BY MELISSA & DOUG



WHAT IT DOES: A brightly-colored wooden puzzle with extra-large knobs has matching full-color pictures underneath each piece to guide little ones.

WHY IT'S GOOD: What better way to teach any child than through puzzles like the Large Farm Jumbo Knob Puzzle. The knobs make it easy for a special-needs child to grab onto, and the bright colors make it an interesting puzzle to look at. It would be so rewarding to sit down with your child and sing "Old McDonald Had A Farm, E-I-E-I-O" and use these puzzle pieces while you sing to show the child what kind of sound that animal makes.

- For Ages 1 and Up
- Can be purchased for \$10.00 on Amazon.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Aimee Guess, who is a blogger for www.SaveAtHomeMommy.com

MINDFLEX MENTAL GAME BY MATTEL

WHAT IT DOES: MindFlex teaches you to use the power of concentration and physical coordination in order to move a ball using just your mind. The game comes with a sensor that measures brainwave activity. When you are focused and concentrating hard enough, you can actually move the small foam ball within the game and shoot a basket.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Kids with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD) especially love games and technology, said ADD coach Brenda Nicholson. "I think that their faster than average brains can appreciate the speed with which technology operates. One of the best gifts that you can get for a child with ADHD is MindFlex. Not only is it fun to play, it gives your child the ability to learn to increase their focus and concentration," she said.

- For Ages 8 and Up
- Can be purchased for \$79.99 on Amazon.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Brenda Nicholson, an ADD mom and the mother of three children with Attention Deficit Disorder. She is also an ADD Coach, trained at the American Coaching Association and blogger at ADD Moms

MARBLE MAZE BALANCE BASES BY GUIDECRAFT

WHAT IT DOES: It is a set of three solid wood balance bases with mazes built into the tops encased behind durable acrylic. This toy also has handles for use on the lap while the child is in a sitting position.

GUIDECRAFT



WHY IT'S GOOD: Jerinda King, who has a child with special needs, said children can have fun while developing their gross motor skills. "This toy helps development of balance, gross motor skills, and proprioception.

It is more challenging than other balance bases because it pivots in all directions, rather than just rocking from side to side," she said.

- For Ages 4 and Up
- Can be purchased for \$150.00 on GuideCraft.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Jerinda King, who has a child with special needs and is a guest blogger for 3 Garnets & 2 Sapphires

MAGNETIC PATTERN BLOCK ACTIVITY SET BY LEARNING RESOURCES



WHAT IT DOES: Set includes 10 double-sided pattern cards and 98 soft foam magnets. Magnets keep pattern block designs in place until kids create a new masterpiece. Teaches spatial reasoning, 2-D shapes, visualization, symmetry, slides, turns and problem solving.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Blogger and mom Heather Smith said her son has mild-moderate autism

and is great at puzzles and is working on learning turn taking and playing games. "This year I've been looking for some great toys that will be fun, educational and stimulating. The Magnetic Pattern Block Set is not only great for doing the puzzles, but also thinking outside the box. The magnetic tiles can be used for a wide variety of activities and we can enlarge the canvas to the fridge where a child can pattern and build pictures on a grander scale," Heather said.

- For Ages 6 and Up
- Can be purchased for \$30.95 at wayfair.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Heather Smith, a never-stay-at-home mom who blogs at Acting Balanced. Heather blogs about topics close to her – autism, family, gluten-free living, special needs children, memoirs and parenting a tween.

CRANIUM CARIBOO ISLAND BY HASBRO



WHAT IT DOES: Kids will find hidden treasure coins and unlock the treasure chest by matching colors, letters, shapes and numbers along the way.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Blogger Michelle Helferich has an 8-year-old daughter with Down syndrome. "She still enjoys playing this game with her younger brother. It is a game siblings can play together

without needing adult supervision. The rules are very easy to learn and remember. There are two skill levels: beginner and advanced. It's great for working on fine motor skills by putting the coins into the treasure box," she said.

- For Ages 3 and Up
- Can be purchased for \$19.99 at Hasbro.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Michelle Helferich, a mother of two who blogs at Big Blueberry Eyes.

PERFECTION BY HASBRO

WHAT IT DOES: Perfection is a timed puzzle game that pops out all the puzzle pieces if not completed within 60 seconds.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Blogger Shannon Des Roches Rosa, who has an autistic son Leo, said they both love classic games, especially those that work on multiple levels. "Problem solving to flex his smarts, independent play for his chill time, and collaborative play for when he's feeling social," Shannon said.

- For Ages 5 to 10
- Can be purchased for \$21.26 at Amazon.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Shannon Des Roches Rosa, a mother of two daughters and a son with autism who blogs at Squidilicious

AMAZON KINDLE

WHAT IT DOES: It is a hand-held e-reader that works exclusively with Amazon. Books can be downloaded within 60 seconds and there is no set up out of the box. Kindle owners can become a member of a Kindle Library and borrow thousands of books for free.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Melissa Hinch-Own said her son has Asperger's Syndrome and goes through stages where he wants to read everything and anything about a specific topic, which has created some challenges over the years in terms of space and cost.

To resolve those two problems, Melissa purchased her son an Amazon Kindle for his 10th birthday. "The Kindle is small and lightweight but can hold so many more books than a bookshelf can, making it the perfect gift for your Aspergic child that just can't get enough of a topic," she said. "No more setting aside a separate line item in your budget for books on Egypt, dinosaurs, trains or whatever the topic of the year is."

- For Ages 5 and Up
- Can be purchased at varying prices from \$79 to \$199 at Amazon.com

RECOMMENDED BY: Melissa Hinch-Ownby, a mother of two children with special needs and owner of The Autism Education Site.



ROSE COTTAGE DOLL HOUSE BY JOYTOYS



WHAT IT DOES: A fully furnished carry-along doll house that includes six dolls so you can start to play and create a little family straight away. Decorate and move the furniture wherever you like and have fun designing your own house. Some assembly required.

WHY IT'S GOOD: Blogger Niri Jaganath and her daughter with Autism love to role play with the characters in the doll house. "The fact that it is wooden and more natural is another important feature. The little characters are suitably sized to provide the sensory stimulation needed. My daughter loves to carry it around with her to comfort herself," she said.

- **For Ages 3 and Up**
- **Can be purchased for \$85.00 at Bigjigtoys.us**

RECOMMENDED BY: Niri Jaganath, a mother of two and blogger at MommyNiri.com who writes about everything from parenting (including her daughter with Autism), to traveling and community service work. She practices using social media for social good at www.MommyNiriCares.com

THE ORIGINAL ROLLER RACER 5000I BY MASON CORPORATION

WHAT IT DOES: This is a self-propelled scooter with a molded seat that can be used indoors and outdoors on any hard or smooth surface.



WHY IT'S GOOD: Ellen Seidman, who produced her own holiday gift guide on her blog site Love That Max, said this toy was kid tested and has received particularly high praise. "For a kid who's never been able to feel the wind in her hair running across the yard, a toy that

gives her that feeling is a good thing," said Andi Sligh whose daughter tested the Roller Racer for Ellen.

- **For Ages 3 to 12**
- **Can be purchased for \$84.51 at Amazon.com**

RECOMMENDED BY: Bobbi Sheahan, a mother of four and published Ellen Seidman, a mother and blogger of Love That Max: A blog about kids with special needs who kick butt. Love That Max produced an extensive gift guide for kids with special needs that were chosen because they were tested by kids and received good feedback. To view other gift ideas recommended by Ellen go to: <http://www.lovethatmax.com/2011/11/best-toys-for-kids-with-special-needs.html>

IPAD BY APPLE

WHAT IT DOES: A lightweight computer system that is just 0.34 inch thin and weighs as little as 1.33 pounds, so it feels completely comfortable in your hands. It allows you to surf the web, check email, watch movies and read books right at your fingertips. When your fingers touch the display, it senses them using electrical fields. Then it instantly transforms your taps, swipes, pinches, and flicks into lifelike actions.

WHY IT'S GOOD: The iPad was one of the most highly recommended gifts this year from our guest blogger moms who have children with special needs. "Yep, I said it... I think this is the number one thing that should be on a special needs parents' wish-list for their child. Ever since my husband brought his home from work in June, our son Liam has taken to it like a duck to water. There's an app for just about everything from social stories to pec symbols," said mommy blogger Heather Smith. "On top of that, the iPad has a camera/video camera that has been amazing for Liam - we take pictures of social situations and expressions and he can learn and have fun at the same time while browse through the images."



Blogger Niri Jaganath said her daughter with autism gains additional therapy like practicing her eye-contact. "She looks in various kids' eyes and notes the number to collect reward points to "buy" stuff for her pretend house," Niri said.

- **For Ages 5 and Up**
- **Can be purchased for \$499 at Apple**

RECOMMENDED BY: Heather Smith, a never-stay-at-home mom who blogs at Acting Balanced; and Niri Jaganath, a mother of two and blogger at MommyNiri.com

CHEWLERY BY KID COMPANIONS

WHAT IT DOES: Kid Companions Chewelry is a pendant that functions as a chewable, wearable or attachable sensory tool for individuals with special needs. They are bpa, phthalate, lead and latex free accessories made for all who must chew, bite or fidget.

WHY IT'S GOOD: A low-tech gift that is great for kids with sensory issues, which are almost always a huge part of autism, is Chewelry said published author and mother Bobbi Sheahan. "It can save a child from having chewed up, cold, icky clothing in the winter."



- **For All Ages**
- **Can be purchased for \$17.49 to \$78.00 at: <http://kidcompanions.com/>**

RECOMMENDED BY: Bobbi Sheahan, a mother of four and published author who writes about her own experience caring for a child with Autism. Her website is <http://www.bobbisheahan.com/aboutbobbie.htm>

The holiday season can be difficult for parents of children with special needs. But it doesn't have to be.

Between dressing up for Halloween, changing clocks back for Daylight Savings Time, partying over turkey on Thanksgiving and wrapping presents, there is no shortage of big doings in the holiday season. Many parents and children embrace these events with gusto, but for parents of children with special needs, the happenings can create significant disruption and spark some serious trouble.

"Around here we usually hold our breath in October and don't exhale until January," says Barbara Streett, a parent of one special needs child, 10, and two neurotypical kids, 7 and 5, respectively. "If it's not one thing at this time of year, it's most definitely another."

Streett is not the only parent grappling with what she's labeled "Holiday Frenzy." All over the country, other parents of children with special needs find themselves in the same difficult situations.

The challenges associated with holidays like Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's can be overwhelming for a family with special needs. The sounds, sights, and schedule disorders during this season can be difficult to manage. Yet with planning and a positive attitude, the holiday season can be something every family can look forward to.

By the time Thanksgiving rolls around most families of children with special needs have managed to survive the daylight savings time change and

Halloween. As with those two events, sensory integration disorder continues to be the big issue in households. If a house full of company is not enough of a distraction, hard-to-explain decorations such as burning candles on the mantle, well-intentioned visitors and pine trees in the living room undoubtedly are.

Add to these the disruption of time off from school—and, therefore, time off from in-home therapy—and the stretch from Thanksgiving through New Year's can be downright difficult.



Still, a few minor tweaks to holiday rituals can go a long way.

- Ease your child into the big family gatherings by introducing him or her to one or two relatives at a time (instead of everybody all at once). Some parents also send family members a letter beforehand with some suggestions about how to make the child feel most comfortable (See *appendix for sample letters*.)
- Rely upon an old tradition: the kids table. Set up a table for the kids, so your child does not have to grapple with the stress of sitting with the grown-ups, yet still feels like part of something special.
- Set up a safe place in the house for your child to go if he or she just wants to be alone.
- If you have a tree during Christmas, decorate it in such a way that satisfies your kid's curiosity. In many cases, this might mean utilizing small stuffed animals instead of ornaments. In other cases, it might mean nothing but plain white lights and strands of cranberries and/or popcorn.

"Tree decorations are supposed to be subjective," says Kelly. "Who's to say you can't get exceptionally creative for the benefit of your child with special needs?"

We've consulted our experts to provide this closer look at some of the biggest challenges with some suggestions on what you can do to make the season a little easier for everybody involved.



Remember, every child is different, and there is no flow chart for how this works.

The overarching goal: Be flexible, and remember that no tradition is more important than the comfort and happiness of your kids.

Holidays are supposed to be special times for the whole family. Most of us grow up expecting them to be memorable and fun. When we have children, we experience these dreams and expectations even more acutely.

It's perfectly natural, then, to experience an emotional roller coaster when presented with the challenge of navigating holidays with a child with special needs.

One key to managing this inevitably frustrating situation is learning to let go.

"You have to be willing to modify certain traditions, or forget them all together," says Barbara Streett, parent of a child with autism. "What you want or envision may not be the best thing for your child, so you have to change your plan accordingly."

With this in mind, AbilityPath experts suggest that parents set realistic expectations and remind themselves of the following tips:

- Holidays are about the kids; it's a successful holiday if the kids are happy.
- When you feel frustrations welling up, take a step back and focus on what you're doing.
- Allow yourself to be frustrated and anxious; there's no shame in that.
- Remind yourself that it's OK to let go of certain traditions that just won't work... for now.
- Remember what your child's "currency" is and use that to interact with him or her.
- Streett is careful to add that especially at holiday time, the definition of a family meal should be flexible.

"If your child doesn't want to eat with everybody else, that needs to be OK; if the child needs to take a break, let him go," she says. "The sooner you stop fighting the fact that these kinds of traditions must be set in stone, the more enjoyable the holiday will be."

A horizontal row of 20 solid orange circles, evenly spaced, spanning the width of the page.

A collection of Fisher-Price Little People furniture and accessories, including a refrigerator, stove, table, chairs, sofa, and various figures, displayed on a blue fabric background.

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Santa Clause 101:

Five Ways To Prepare For A Visit With Santa

10

During this time of year visits to Santa top the list for many children with special needs. Although the visit is much anticipated, the reality is the experience can be a sensory overload.

WRITE A SOCIAL STORY:

Describe in detail for your child what to expect. Describe the sites, senses and smell of where the visit will take place. Describe Santa in detail and show pictures of his beard. Describe what it may be like sitting in Santa's lap. Read the social story to your child and practice the actual interaction with Santa.

REVIEW SANTA AMERICA CHANNEL VIDEO FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

This entertaining and educational video can help you prepare your child for the actual visit: www.youtube.com/santaamericachannel



TAKE PART IN THE NOERR PROGRAMS CARING SANTA VISITS AT SIMON PROPERTY GROUP MALLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

At most shopping malls, the line to visit Santa is a busy one, featuring harried parents, eye-catching decorations and festive music. The Noerr Programs intends to tone down the traditionally hectic Santa experience to allow children with special needs to meet Saint Nick on their terms. The locations for the sessions will take place are the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto, Calif.; North East Mall near Fort Worth, Texas; Burlington Mall in Burlington, Mass.; Oxford Valley Mall in Langhorne, Penn.; and Town Center at Cobb near Atlanta, Ga. The Santa areas will be made “sensory friendly” to reduce the distractions that typically trouble autistic children. The music and lights will be turned down. Santa staff and volunteers will avoid loud, sudden movements.

“Caring Santa continues the spirit we started during Easter with the Caring Bunny, fulfilling our dream of providing a comforting and physically accommodating experience for families with children that have special needs,” said Judy Noerr, chief executive officer of The Noerr Programs.

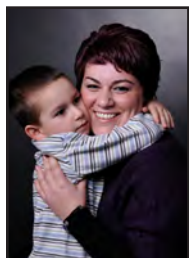
The Caring Santa event kicks off Sunday, Nov. 20 at 9 a.m. and continues until 11 a.m. local standard times at Burlington Mall and Stanford Shopping Center, and from 10 a.m. until 12 p.m. at North East Mall and Town Center at Cobb when each mall opens to the general public. Oxford Valley Mall’s Caring Santa event will be held Sunday, Dec. 4 from 9 a.m.-11 a.m. Families are encouraged to RSVP prior to the event at www.abilitypath.org. (See Appendix For Information and List of Participating Malls)

FIND SANTA EVENTS IN YOUR CITY THAT CATER TO CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:

More and more cities and non-profit agencies have created unique Santa times for children with special needs. Check with your local parks and recreation or regional center.

CREATE YOUR OWN SANTA VISITS:

Team together with other parents to create your own Santa visits in your home. The added benefit is you get to control the environment and avoid the crowds at the mall.



I HAVE A LITTLE DREIDEL
(SPD HANUKKAH) BY ALYSIA

Happy Hanukkah!

It's my kids' favorite holiday, and we're getting ourselves ready for eight nights full of celebration.

This year, Hanukkah starts at sundown on December 21st, so we're quickly changing gears from eating Thanksgiving turkey to decorating the house with dreidels and menorahs.

For those of you who don't know, Hanukkah is a celebration of the Jews' victory in a battle to reclaim their temple from the Syrian army. In order to rededicate their temple, the Jews needed oil to light their "eternal flame" candle. They thought they only had enough oil to burn for one day. However, a miracle occurred and the oil lasted for eight days, giving the Jews enough time to make more oil. This is why the holiday is called the "Festival of Lights" and is celebrated by lighting candles for eight nights.

Any holiday can disrupt a family's routine. One that is eight nights long can really change things up. My son, with all his sensory issues, can't sit through an organized Temple Tots celebration or anything like that. So for a successful holiday, we'll be doing all our celebrating at home, just like I did when I was a kid. And this year, we'll be making our Hanukkah sensory friendly.

We'll be celebrating the eight nights of Hanukkah with all eight senses - the seven of sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing, vestibular and proprioception, plus the latest sense in the world of sensory processing: interoception. Here's how our family will focus on one sense for each night:



Night 1: PROPRIOCEPTION

On this night, we'll light the first candle in the menorah and focus on our joints and muscles. This is a great way to start the holiday week, because this is what my son craves the most. Our activities are also a perfect way to kick off our celebration. To get him the

proprioceptive input he needs, my son and I will first start by cleaning up the house – dusting and vacuuming and putting away all the toys. He'll also be in charge of carrying the presents into our living room for that first night. This heavy lifting will help exercise all the parts of his body, and stacking the presents in piles for each family member will help with his muscle control. On this first night, we'll start to make some traditional Hanukkah desserts to be cooked in oil, so I'll have him stir up the cookie batter for extra sensory input in the kitchen.

All this heavy work and controlled movements will help us build up his sensory deposits for the rest of the holiday week. By starting off with proprioception, we're setting ourselves up for a calm week ahead.

Night 2: SMELL

Because the Hanukkah holiday celebrates the miracle of the oil lasting for eight days, traditional Hanukkah foods are cooked in oil. This brings quite a lot of new smells into our house, since we don't usually cook this way. My son is recently very sensitive to smells. To help with this, we'll start off slowly by cooking one traditional food each night, plus at least one familiar and appealing smell. This night, we'll make potato latkes (crispy potato pancakes) cooked in oil, and bake the pumpkin cookies from the batter we made the night before.



Night 3: TASTE

Just like with smell, there are a lot of different things to eat for Hanukkah. Traditional foods include potato latkes, applesauce, doughnuts, and cookies. My son is particular to certain textures, and latkes, applesauce and doughnuts fall into the category of "non-preferred" foods. I've learned enough over the years to not force him to eat anything he doesn't like because it doesn't end well. However, my hope is that by including him in the preparation of all the foods (helping measure out the ingredients for the latkes, mixing up the batter for the cookies) it will encourage him to try the different foods. I'm also not above a little bribery. Three bites of latkes may equal one pumpkin cookie. We'll see how desperate we get.

Night 4: TOUCH

One of our favorite activities to do as a family is to make Hanukkah decorations. After lighting the candles on the fourth night, we'll sit down to make our own dreidels. While the song says "Dreidel, dreidel, dreidel...I made it out of clay," we'll actually use Model Magic to make our

homemade dreidels and menorahs. I first discovered Model Magic last year at my son's preschool. They used it instead of play dough because a child in his class had a wheat allergy. Model Magic is fantastic. It's easier to use than actual clay and is great to work with. My son gets great deep pressure input from rolling out the Model Magic and the kids have fun mashing up the different colors. It will dry as hard as clay in 24 hours and cleans up much better than play dough. The decorations they create will last us through the rest of the holiday and into the next year.

Night 5: VESTIBULAR



The dreidel game is a great game to play during the Hanukkah week. My grandmother sends the kids their own dreidels every year filled with chocolate gelt (coins). A dreidel is a spinning top with four sides, each side displaying a different Hebrew letter. In the dreidel game, the chocolate gelt is put into a pile in the middle of all the players. Each player takes a turn spinning the top. The amount of chocolate gelt that the player gets depends on which letter is showing when the dreidel stops spinning.

My son loves the sensation of being dizzy, so he spends a lot of time twirling in circles in our house or on the swings. Since the vestibular sense is all about balance and spatial sense, this year I've made up the "be the dreidel" game. Instead of using an actual dreidel, I'll have the boys take turns being a dreidel themselves. I've made large signs of each of the four Hebrew letters to spread out on the floor. Whichever one they touch (or stumble to) after I say "stop!" will be the letter they land on as the "dreidel". I can only imagine how much amusement this will bring while providing my son the vestibular input he needs.

Night 6: HEARING

One of my most favorite memories of my childhood Hanukkah celebrations is singing the prayers and songs as we light the candles. However, this is one of the reasons we can't go to an organized Hanukkah celebration. Our last trip to temple was when my son was two and he stood on a chair and yelled at the Rabbi to "stop singing!!!" While the Rabbi wasn't fazed, I was mortified and never returned. Not wanting to lose this tradition, we keep our singing at home now. This way we can sing "Hanukkah O Hanukkah" and "I Have A Little Dreidel" as loudly or as quietly as we want, or not at all. It helps keep the tradition alive in our family while being respectful of my son's sensory sensitivities.

Night 7: SIGHT

On this night, we'll be lighting seven candles on each menorah, plus the "Shamash" or helper candle. This is the extra candle that is used to light all the other candles.



Because my two oldest boys are old enough now to each light their own menorah, we'll have 16 candles lit for the seventh night. These lights are mesmerizing for my son. Something about all those flickering flames just calms him. So we'll spend quite a lot of time just staring at the candles in the middle of the table. It's one of the few times during the holiday week that my son is relaxed enough to sit for an extended period of time. We'll use this time to reflect on how the week has been going so far, or read more of the story of Hanukkah, or just sit quietly as a family.

Night 8. INTEROCEPTION

According to SPD Life, interoception is "the sense responsible for detecting internal regulation response". It's how our bodies tell us if we're hungry, thirsty, or if we need to go to the bathroom. It works in conjunction with the proprioceptive and vestibular senses to help us regulate our bodies internally. For our last night of Hanukkah, we can look at interoception in a literal and figurative way. In the literal sense, on the eighth night, our bodies are full. We've enjoyed some great food and drink and had lots of activities to fill up all our senses. My son does his best job regulating his bodily functions when his sensory diet is varied and full. We've done that by focusing on different activities each night for each sense.



In the figurative sense, we are full of Hanukkah by this last night. All of our presents are opened, every spot in the menorah is filled with candles, and we're ready to bring ourselves out of celebration mode

and move into wintertime. It's time to get ourselves back into our regular daily routine.

Contributed by Moms:

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A SOCIAL STORY ABOUT SANTA

A Visit with Santa

I am going to visit Santa Claus. Santa wears a red suit and has white hair and a beard.

He brings presents to girls and boys.

I may have to wait in a line to see Santa. If I do, I can think about what I want to say to Santa.



Some children sit on Santa's lap, stand next to him, or sit next to him to tell him what they want for Christmas.



Santa usually asks children questions. Santa also likes to talk and listen. I will try to visit Santa and answer his questions.



I will probably feel excited and happy when I get to talk with Santa and tell him what I would like for Christmas.



Social narrative made with Boardmaker, Mayer-Johnson LLC, 1981-2009. Used with permission.

SIMON PROPERTY GROUP MALLS FEATURING CARING SANTA HOURS

NOVEMBER 20, 2011

Stanford Shopping Center

Palo Alto, Calif.

9:00 – 11:00 am

Burlington Mall

Burlington, Mass.

9:00 – 11:00 am

North East Mall

Fort Worth, Texas

10:00 am – 12:00 pm

Town Center at Cobb

Atlanta, Ga.

10:00 am – 12:00 pm

DECEMBER 4, 2011

Oxford Valley Mall

Langhorne, Penn.

9:00 – 11:00 am

Dear Family and Friends:

We look forward to seeing everyone for the holidays. I can't wait to see everyone and celebrate together. Before we gather this year, I would like to share with you about _____.

My son is loving, kind, and very affectionate. He loves to talk about his siblings, _____ and _____, and camping. He also likes to play Candyland, Legos, and with his iPod. He also has autism.

Holidays are a time of year that _____ looks forward to. However, the extended family and friends, decorations, and festive noises that the holiday brings can be frightening and confusing for him. They also cause him anxiety because there are so many new things happening that are different from his routine.

Please understand that when you talk to him, he might not understand you. This is not because he is 'stupid', it is because there may be a lot of distractions in the room. _____ needs time to process what you have just told him. He may even need a quiet place to retreat to take in everything presented to him in this new and different environment.

Please have a quiet room available for _____ so that he can have time to himself to process everything. This room should be off limits to everyone but _____ and me (mom). _____ is used to routine and all these changes can cause anxiety. Once _____ can regroup, he can get by OK. However, if something changes, he may need time to re-learn the situation again.

_____ may appear bossy and controlling. This is his way of coping. Things have to be done in a way he is familiar with or else he may get confused and frustrated. This does not mean you have to change the way you are doing things--just please be patient with _____, look to me (mom) to redirect this behavior.

People with autism often partake in repetitive behaviors to help themselves feel more comfortable. _____ might repeat phrases, walk in circles or any number of different things. He is not trying to be disruptive or defiant; he is doing this to regulate himself in his surroundings. Please be respectful to these behaviors and look to me (mom) on how to handle this. Also understand – these behaviors help calm him down.

Dinnertime with _____ is a different set of table manners. Sitting in one place can be difficult. _____ often needs to get up and walk around (maybe even go to his quiet room) to regulate himself so he can eat. This is because _____ may be overwhelmed by all the smells, sounds, and people. I ask that you not give this a lot of attention and continue eating and conversing during the family meal. Autism is a sensory processing disorder, eating and chewing are hard (expect loud smacking noises). Don't be offended if he doesn't eat some food - _____ cannot eat certain foods as his sensory system is impaired.

Please do not be critical of mine or my husband's parenting skills. Remember that _____ needs to be watched more closely than most children are his age. Like all parents, we do our best but are not perfect. Holidays are filled with new sights, sounds, and smells packed into a busy and often frantic household with a big tree plopped down in the middle of it. It is very hard work to incorporate autism into this. I said it was hard – but it can be done. We have been doing this for _____ years, and although it is not perfect, it works for us. We are excited to share this holiday experience with you and look forward to seeing you.

Sample Letter: Letter to Family & Friends Informing them about your child in a wheelchair

Dear Family & Friends,

We are excited to see everyone this holiday season. I wanted to give you a quick update on _____ and how he is doing before we get together.

_____ is doing great and thriving in his new school this year. His favorite subjects are Math and lunch (surprise, surprise, just like his mom he LOVES his food). He enjoys playing on his new iPad as well and cannot wait to share some of the new games he has downloaded with his cousins.

_____ has graduated to a bigger size wheelchair. Don't worry; the wheelchair can fit through standard size doors. _____ and _____ (service dog) are quite apt at getting around and we can't wait to see your new house.

[Insert any additional descriptions of your child or their service dog].

We know there will be some young cousins this year at the gathering that may have some questions about _____. If anyone has any questions, feel free to ask me. We know people may have many good questions to ask and we do not mind answering them.

I also wanted to briefly explain that _____ is a very independent child. He likes to get his own bags, his books and "drive" himself around. It's only natural that people want to help him and do things for him but there will be plenty of opportunities for everyone to help throughout the weekend. Going over large thresholds can be difficult, clearing his pathway at times may be helpful, and _____ not shy about asking for assistance when he really needs it.

We look forward to seeing everyone next week, if you have any questions, give me a call. Thanks!