



Christmas Sensory Survival Kit

Updated for 2025/26



With Christmas around the corner, we thought it might be helpful to share a Christmas Sensory Survival Kit.

To help those experiencing sensory integration or sensory processing differences better manage the sensory challenges of the season.

We have broken Christmas into manageable chunks, offering you some of the best advice out there from individuals and expert organisations, including tips from our SIE therapists & friends!

Big Dramatic Disclaimer

We are all individuals with individual sensory needs and preferences. All the suggestions in this Christmas Sensory Survival Kit should be tailored to you or your child's specific sensory needs, abilities and preferences.

There are a number of ways to use this guide...

- Read
- Print this document
- Make notes
- Highlight information
- Cross out info to suit you
- Make lists
- Share with friends and family

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Out & About

Some people enjoy the first signs of Christmas – the scent of pine, twinkling lights, and Christmas classics playing on the radio – but others may find the changes to environment and schedules harder to cope with.

Public spaces become busier, decorations appear everywhere, and not to mention the enthusiastic Christmas carolers and Santas. It can all become a bit overwhelming.

Don't fret, there are tools you can use to help manage the peak of Christmas. We've come up with a packing list of items that could help manage busy spaces during this time...

- ☐ Ear defenders/ear plugs
- ☐ Headphones/earbuds (pick your own music)
- ☐ A drink and preferred snacks
- ☐ Chewable items to help with self-regulation
- ☐ Favourite fidgets
- ☐ Weighted toys or lap pads
- ☐ Sunglasses

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(Tick off the ones you have, cross out items that aren't suitable for you and add your own as a handy reminder.)

What to wear can also be a challenge. Season changes can be a struggle for individuals with sensory sensitivities. The shift from light layers to heavier, more restrictive winter clothing can be taxing.

We've listed some wardrobe switches that might help. Take a look...

Traditional Winter Clothes

Sensory Swaps

Bobble hat

A peaked cap to help limit the visual field OR earmuffs

A jumper

A hooded jumper to cover the ears and eyes

A traditional woven jumper

Comfy fleece, soft on the skin

Multiple layers

Compression clothes

Button fastenings

Popper fastenings

Gloves

Long sleeves with thumb holes

Laces

Velcro

Remember that as individuals, some of these options may be better than others. Highlight the options you prefer or would like to try. You could start integrating the changes earlier, to give you or your child more time to adapt.

Need to hit the shops? Involve your child in choosing the items and respect their views. Wash new items before worn, this will remove unfamiliar scents and soften the fabric. **[More info here](#)** on sensory challenges of the changing seasons.





Christmas Activities

School at Christmas

The lead-up to Christmas often involves many school celebrations. The best advice we can give is to talk to the school with plenty of time before Christmas. Chat to your child's teacher about ways to include them that accommodate their sensory differences. You could pass on [this blog](#) from Mr Finch on creating an inclusive nativity play.

Discuss with your child what it could look like for them at school, the changes in routine, and about what is happening during Christmas break.

Here is a useful [article from Reachout ASC](#), loaded with practical ideas to manage all those Christmas-related activities at school. We particularly like the idea of using social stories to explain all the differences. A social story is a series of pictures illustrating an activity or event step by step. You could create your own or look for downloadable ones online: blogger AndNextComesL has collated [a list of free festive social stories here](#).

Your child doesn't have to miss out on those special Christmas moments. There are plenty of activities for children with sensory processing differences to enjoy.

Santa's Grotto

Check out your local Santa's Grotto, some grottos around the UK offer times for autistic visitors or those with sensory processing differences. Often there will be minimal staff, soft or no music, fewer people as well as lower lighting.

Can't find a grotto that offers this service? Sensory Friendly Solutions wrote an article containing lots of practice advice to [make your child's visit to Santa a success](#).

Local Christmas Film Viewings

Many cinemas offer viewings that are suitable for individuals with sensory integration differences – you might see them described as 'autism friendly'. Here [Accessible Screenings UK](#) is the hub of information for all activities relating to disability and access in UK cinemas.

If this doesn't suit you, you could create a cinema/movie night at home?

Include favourite treats to eat and drink, close curtains, and get cosy with blankets and pillows. With the added bonus of no adverts!

Make Christmas Decorations Together

Sensory seekers who delight in slime, may enjoy [this Christmas tree slime recipe](#) from Little Bins for Little Hands. Or how about making pretend snow from two simple household ingredients – [see this tutorial from the BBC](#).

For kids that don't like sloppy textures, there are plenty of mess-free fine motor Christmas crafts, such as [this tutorial on creating a festive jumper with stickers](#) from Taming Little Monsters.



“The holiday season is a lovely time to slow down and enjoy being together as a family. That does not have to mean crowded parties, busy shopping centres, or activities that leave everyone exhausted. Give yourself permission to step away from the idea of a “traditional” holiday and instead follow the sensory joys that feel right for you and your children.”

Beth Smithson

Advanced SI Practitioner, Occupational Therapist & Lifelong Learning Director



Time Out



Take a Parenting Pause

“Self-care isn’t always realistic when you’re in the thick of parenting, especially during the holidays. Instead of trying to escape or just enduring it until you break, try creating pause moments each day. Even 3–5 minutes to reset your nervous system makes a difference.

A pause might look like stepping outside for cold air, wrapping up in a weighted blanket, blasting a favourite song, or walking while counting your breaths.

It’s not about stopping life; it’s about pausing within it. To reset. To regulate. To go again. Because holidays aren’t just for the kids. Parents get overwhelmed too, and our sensory systems deserve some grace and a pause.”

Liz Evans

The Untypical OT



Self-regulation is intertwined with how the body understands, manages and reacts to information from our senses – both about what is happening in our environment and what is happening within our own body. Dramatic changes to daily/weekly routines can be very dysregulating for both children and adults. With some forethought, you can plan how you will support yourself or your child from becoming overwhelmed or getting energised to participate in activities.

Here are some ways to look after yourself this season:

1 Keep Moving

The festive season can involve a lot of sedentary days: plan in regular movement breaks. Activities involving pushing or pulling or carrying heavy weights are particularly helpful.

2 Self-Regulate

Fall back on your favourite self-regulation techniques to self-soothe, which may include music, fidget toys/jewellery, chewing gum or chewy foods, drinking a smoothie through a straw, etc.

3 Maintain Routine

Routine is key, try to keep meal and bed time the same. Are you feeling hungry, thirsty or tired? Section your day like normal, but with those Christmas plans dotted in!

4 Quiet Time

Ensure quiet time by scheduling it into the calendar. Quiet days are great to help reenergise and shouldn’t be seen as a luxury!

Find out more self-regulation techniques in our article [here](#).

If you are receiving therapy for sensory integration or processing differences, ask your SI Practitioner for individualised advice that fits your unique sensory needs.





“Bake something simple together.

Whether it’s gingerbread, shortbread, or something easy from a packet, baking offers a calm, sensory-rich way to explore food without pressure. Enjoy the warmth, smells and tastes together – at your own pace.”

Beth Smithson

Advanced SI Practitioner, Occupational Therapist & Lifelong Learning Director



with Anna Willis - Advanced Sensory Integration Practitioner, occupational therapist, and founder of Active Play Therapies

Cooking & Eating

For many families, Christmas mealtimes sparkle with excitement - but they can also bring a wave of sensory differences to navigate. New foods, rich smells, bustling tables and well-meaning relatives can make eating feel pressured rather than joyful, especially for children with sensory processing differences.

We spoke with Anna Willis - Advanced Sensory Integration Practitioner, occupational therapist, and founder of **Active Play Therapies** about cooking and eating during the holidays, and she shared thoughtful, compassionate advice to help families enjoy Christmas eating at a pace that truly works for them.

Keep a Safe Food Close By

Christmas menus often look very different from a child's usual routine, so having a safe food available can make the world feel steadier. Preview the menu with your child if appropriate, or plan ahead so there’s always something familiar on the table. “Comfort foods aren’t an avoidance strategy,” Anna notes. “They’re an anchor - a sensory and emotional reassurance.”

Christmas Dinner Isn’t a Test

The middle of Christmas dinner is not the moment to learn about new foods - unless your child chooses to.

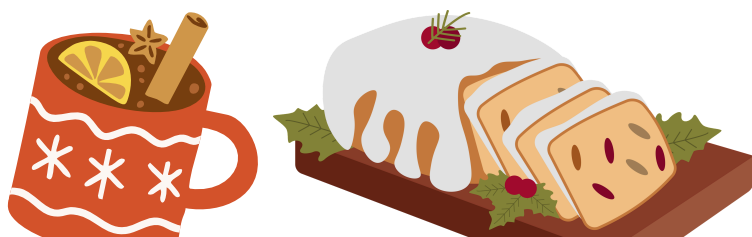
Keep expectations low and let your child engage only at a level that feels comfortable. Passing a bowl of potatoes to someone or helping cut something could be a huge success.


“You don’t owe explanations to relatives about what your child eats,” Anna reminds us. “Trust your instincts - you know your child best.”

Try a Learning Plate

A learning plate is a powerful, pressure-free tool. It’s a completely separate plate where a child can explore a new food at their own pace, with no expectation - not even a single bite.

Maybe they prod it with a fork, poke it with a finger, or hold it for a quick sniff. This kind of gentle exposure builds confidence and helps children stay curious rather than overwhelmed.





Introduce Christmas Crackers by practising with some cheap or leftover ones. Warn your child in advance about the noise and items that fall out. Or make your own without any snaps.

Decorating



Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without decorations! Our SIE Occupational Therapist, Dr Lelanie Brewer (Highly Specialist OT & Advanced Sensory Integration Practitioner), shares simple strategies to show how small decorating choices can make a big difference for children with sensory differences — creating festive spaces that are both joyful and comfortable...

Soften the Sparkle

Choose warm fairy lights instead of bright, flashing ones. Avoid strobe or rapidly blinking patterns that can cause discomfort or overload.

Go Easy on Sound and Movement

Musical ornaments, motion-activated decorations, and loud holiday inflatables can be startling. Use them sparingly or keep them in non-relaxing areas.

Balance Festive and Calm Spaces

Balance festive spaces with calm areas in the home with less visual clutter and comfy lighting to reset from the excitement.

Offer Children Choice and Control

Let children help decide where Christmas decorations go. Allow them to decorate one personal space they can keep comfortable and predictable.

The National Autistic Society shares....

[See more ideas here](#)



"Gradually introduce decorations into the areas you've chosen to decorate."





The National Autistic Society

warns about scheduling too many activities during the holiday period, particularly lots of social activities on consecutive days. Allow quiet after an active day for rest, if needed.

Socialising & Celebrating

As your calendar begins to fill up, it's important to manage expectations. Things to consider while you make plans...

Retreat

Have a quiet place in mind to retreat to during an outing.

Be Flexible

Leaving early is a real possibility; be flexible and encourage your loved ones to accept/understand this.

Inform

Prepare friends and family, informing them of certain needs that should be met, e.g. Adjust space according to sensitivities.

Familiarise

Remind, or introduce family/friends through a photo of them before the meeting.

Cater

Bring food to suit you/your child.

Plan Ahead

Plan activities that are calming for the nervous system – include a walk or play in the park.



Christmas Traditions

In short, make your own way of celebrating or simply getting through this busy period. Many Christmas traditions, such as an advent calendar, can be about building excitement and counting down to the big day but for some people this builds tension and anxiety. In reality, there are no rules or compulsory elements to this season, although the changes are hard to avoid in public spaces (online shopping, anyone?).



“Forget conformity and make this season about what works for you or your family. Creating a family ritual, like lighting candles, sharing three good things from the year, or dancing to one favourite song together.”

Beth Smithson

Advanced SI Practitioner, Occupational Therapist & Lifelong Learning Director



Present Giving & Receiving

Opening surprise presents, feeling the sensation of different wrapping paper and tape and unexpected textures beneath and dealing with the expectations of how to react can be very overwhelming.

Wrapping Presents

Here are some alternative ideas to traditional gift wrapping, along with simple ways to adjust the unwrapping process to make it less overwhelming for someone with sensory differences.

Some advice for gift giving:

- Open gifts in private
- Inform or show them the gift before it's opened
- Space out the gifts throughout the day or over a couple of days
- Rather than gifts, suggest friends put money towards an activity

Some advice for buying gifts:

- Schedule time for shopping
- Avoid busy shopping hours
- Shop online

Need some help with gifts for loved ones with sensory integration differences?

Here's our [gift guide for all ages](#).



Parent, Helen Leyland shares
"Use fabric drawstring bags to wrap gifts instead of crinkly paper. Quieter and quicker!"



And Finally...



Keep a diary to see what did and didn't work for you and your family.

Keep a Journal

We know reading this guide can feel overwhelming and can be a lot of responsibility. Why not keep a journal or diary with notes that worked well and didn't? Every individual's needs will be different and it will give you a helpful reminder for next year.

Be Kind, Be Flexible

Although it may feel frustrating, we need to show compassion when things don't go to plan. Adding pressure on a person who is feeling sensory overload isn't helpful. Ask friends and family to respect routine and decisions based on the individual's needs. Emphasise to the individual that they don't need to mask their feelings. Reiterate it's okay to not feel okay and to seek out a self-regulating activity instead.

Could Your Child's Behaviour Be Based in Sensory Issues?

Are you concerned about your child's...

- Sensitivity to Noise
- Avoidance of Certain Textures
- Strong Clothing Preferences
- Picky Eating
- Intolerance to Bright Lights
- Anxiety in Crowded Places
- Difficulty With Transitions
- Sensory Seeking Behaviours
- Poor Balance and Coordination
- Difficulties With Planning and Organising
- Sensory Meltdowns

Are you a parent looking for somewhere to start?

Take a look at our [free resources here](#).

Or discover our latest family articles and resources on our blog

[Sensory Help Now's Blog](#)

Sensory Help Now is a service for parents and carers of children with sensory processing and sensory integration issues. We provide access to therapists trained in sensory integration via online one-to-one coaching, and instant-access short courses.

[Learn more at SensoryHelpNow.org](https://www.sensoryhelpnow.org)





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