



Where Autism
Professionals Connect

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An autism advent calendar for schools

While most of us get excited as the Christmas songs start playing on the radio, the Christmas decorations go up in the shops and suddenly there are parties to go to and presents to buy, children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can go into panic. An already confusing world suddenly sounds different, looks different and even smells different. In school familiar routines are overturned to fit in with Christmas play rehearsals, carol concerts, visits from Santa, Christmas fairs and end of term parties.

For these reasons, many schools that support children with ASD are filled with dread when the decorations go up. As an Autism Support Teacher the last weeks before Christmas were always my busiest. Previously stable children would start to throw plant pots and climb out of windows, otherwise confident children would refuse to go into the school hall, one pupil I worked with retreated to the school foyer and hid under a bench, whilst another normally gentle boy started hitting his class mates.

But it doesn't have to be this way. For all the children I have seen in meltdown before Christmas, there are just as many who have come to love it, who have sung before an audience for the first time, joined in with a pantomime, sold their own biscuits at a Christmas fair and helped put up lights around the school: they nearly all love the lights!

So what's the secret? As with everything, when you work with children on the Autistic Spectrum, it comes down to three things, **planning, communication and support.**

So here is my **autism advent calendar for schools.**

December 1st

Print out a calendar showing the whole of December and mark on it everything coming up over the next few weeks. Using pictures to link the calendar to their current interest (vehicles, Super Mario, Minecraft etc.) will help them connect to it.

December 2nd

Meet with parents to plan together how you can help their child cope with the challenges coming up. Keep communication going throughout the Christmas period with 'Home – school' books.

December 3rd

Go through the calendar with the child. Many people worry that letting children know in advance will make them anxious, but it is better to manage the stress in a quiet place with no other demands than during a Christmas nativity play! Highlighting the next event on the calendar and crossing it off afterwards helps focus on one thing at a time.

December 4th

Identify a quiet place they can go if everything gets too much. Ideally this should stay Christmas decoration free.

December 8th

Look through pictures of Christmas. Remind them what it looks like. We can often take for granted what ASD children know. But social information is not stored well and they need frequent reminding.

December 9th

Make a social story showing what to expect and do in each Christmas activity. Social stories are particularly helpful for activities that only happen at Christmas e.g. meeting Father Christmas.

December 10th

Talk through the Christmas play and offer a restricted choice of what they can do (no more than 3 - as too much freedom is stressful). Include a supporting role - making costumes etc.

December 11th

Set up private rehearsals, for those children with ASD who love performing (there are quite a few) make sure you give them extra opportunities to rehearse in private. They are likely to be brilliant at remembering their lines but find working in a group hard.

December 12th

Put up decorations with them: control can also a big issue for children with ASD. Being involved makes the change in appearance of the school less of a surprise and easier to cope with.

December 15th

Keep up normal routines. Some schools find keeping one or two non-Christmas days a week or restricting Christmas activities to the afternoon works well.

December 16th

Provide a visual timetable showing the activities each day. Children with ASD find visual information much easier to process when they are stressed and being able to check a

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timetable independently helps with anxiety. For older children put information in their planner.

December 17th

Performance Day. Give them an object to focus on or fiddle with ('fiddle objects' are a real stress buster for children with ASD) and stand them next to a trusted adult ready to take them away if necessary. Be aware that even children who have flourished in rehearsal may suddenly lose confidence when presented with an audience.

December 18th

Pantomime Outing. Show pictures of the actors and set in advance. Ideally visit the theatre when it's empty. At the performance sit at the back where it is quietest and you can exit without interrupting the show. Some theatres do special shows for children with ASD.

December 19th

Christmas Party. Make sure there is food they will like, try to include quiet games (some children with ASD are very sensitive to noise).

December 20th

Sit back and relax. The hard work is over and with preparation, communication and support all your children with ASD should have a Happy Christmas!

Dates are approximate and will vary according to your own school calendar.

For more information on visual timetables, social stories and fiddle objects see the National Autistic Society's Website <http://www.autism.org.uk>