

ENJOYING The Holidays With Your Special Needs Child



The decorations are perfect, the presents look magical, and the entire family is smiling and relaxed.

That's how the holidays are portrayed in media and advertising, but it's not the reality for families with special needs children.

Holidays and other family-centered events often become trials for the parents of children with special needs. They are something to "survive" or "manage", with little enjoyment expected.

In fact, the holiday season may be one of the most stressful times of the year for families dealing with the lifelong challenges of raising a child with a disability.

Many feel as though a spotlight is being shined on their lives, and that their families fail to measure up to the so-called "normal" families depicted in movies, TV shows and ads. This can create feelings of guilt, resentment and stress that can take all of the joy out of the holidays.

However, it does not always have to be that way. With planning, realistic expectations and a positive attitude, the parents of special needs children can reduce holiday stress and create a better experience for the entire family.

Here are my top ten tips for not only surviving and managing the holidays with your special needs child, but actually enjoying them.

With best wishes from my family to yours,

Deanna

This free publication is provided by
Deanna Picon, founder of Your Autism
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parents of special needs children.

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Top Ten Tips # 1

Acknowledge Your Feelings

The holidays tend to unleash a parade of unspoken feelings for parents of special needs children. These are the thoughts that you've been too busy or stressed to really think about, and the negative emotions that you may feel guilty about having.

You may feel sad, depressed or even resentful or jealous of others during the holidays. There may be times when you secretly wish your child didn't have a disability and could participate in regular holiday events and activities.

The first thing to remember is that these kinds of feelings are perfectly normal. You didn't plan on having a child with special needs. Nobody does. So, it's okay to have these thoughts and feelings on occasion. This doesn't make you a bad person or a bad parent – it just means that you're human.



Loving your children and doing your best for them makes you a good parent, whether your child has special needs or not. Continuing to do your best in difficult circumstances makes you both a good parent and a good person.

Acknowledge your feelings and know that it's okay to have them now and then. If your negative thoughts are still bothering you, you may find it helpful to express these feelings in a variety of ways such as writing in a journal or talking to a good friend or a trained coach.



“I discovered I always have choices and sometimes it’s only a choice of attitude.”

- Judith M. Knowlton, psychologist, author and alcoholism counselor

Top Ten Tips # 2

Realize You're Not Alone

The holiday blues are a common problem. Many people hit by the extra financial and time stress, physical fatigue and family pressures feel depressed at this time of the year.

The world-famous Johns Hopkins Medical Center* blames high stress and high expectations about the holidays, along with the lack of sunlight during shorter winter days, for an increase in depression in the general population.

Add in the extra burdens facing a family dealing with a special needs child – is it any wonder you might be feeling down?

You're not the only parents rushing around in a holiday panic or dealing with tricky family situations. Your particular circumstances may be harder than most, but they will still be better than others. We all have blessings to count.

Other people around you may not only dread the coming holiday season, but other celebrations throughout the year.

Millions will be depressed around Valentine's Day; men and women who aren't dating or married, and have no prospects on the horizon, may feel sad lonely with nobody special to share the day with.

In other words, every holiday is difficult for somebody – usually a lot of somebodies.

You're not alone.



“Stress-related events such as the holidays may trigger half of all depressive episodes.”

- *Dr. Robert Hales, chair of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of California*

*www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/stories/december_beating_depression_during_the_holidays.html

Top Ten Tips # 3

Remember Who You Are

It's very easy to allow the all-encompassing challenge of raising a child with special needs to define you and the rest of your life. It can happen without you even realizing it.

Suddenly you're no longer "lover of country music and great pastry chef", or "sales agent and talented handyman" ... now, you are just the parent of "that kid with a disability".

It's important to remember that the person underneath that label is still you.

Like any parent, much of your life is going to be centered on your child or children from now on, but that doesn't change your past. You still sold that software, sang along with Tim McGraw, built that deck and made all of those cookies. Those things are real and permanent.



Today, you may have given up your job and have a lot less time to spend listening to the radio or organizing your tools in the garage, but you're still the same person inside.

If anything, you are an even stronger and better person for having stepped up to the challenges of life with a special needs child.

Nobody can turn back time and no responsible parent can live as they did before children came along. Being the parent of a special needs child is just a new part of you.



“All people occasionally make mistakes and sometimes fall short of their own goals. Strong people are the ones who admit that, get up and try again.”

- Deanna Picon, founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC

Top Ten Tips # 4

Don't Isolate Yourself

Your friends and family don't like or love you less because you have a child with special needs. In fact, they probably admire and respect you more than ever after seeing how difficult it can be to raise a child with a disability.

And the people who really love you are not offering pity, they are giving empathy – they are putting themselves in your shoes, as far as they can, and trying to figure out how they can help.

Of course, people who don't have special needs children will never completely “get it”. You will never completely know what it is like to be someone else, either.

But friends and family reach past their differences to find their common grounds. Love erases barriers.



Don't shut these people out of your life, and don't shut yourself in. Reach out and you will find many hands waiting to take yours, particularly around the holidays.

Spending time with those who love you is good for any person, but particularly important for those in stressful and potentially isolating situations.

Spend an hour with people who care for you, recharge your batteries and you'll have more energy to make the holidays special for your whole family.



“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

- *Dr. Leo Buscaglia, American author, educator and motivational speaker, known as “Dr. Love”*

Top Ten Tips # 5

Ask For Help When You Need It

Unless you have a secret identity and a cape in your closet, you're not a superhero. And without super powers, no parent of a special needs child is going to make it through the rest of their lives without help.

Of course, we all have our pride and want to be able to stand on our own two feet, take care of our own families and do things our own way.

But there are always going to be times when all the challenges and stress get on top of you, and you just need an extra pair of hands to help you through.

That's more likely to happen around the busy, family-centered holiday season than any other time of the year. So, it's no surprise to find yourself wishing for a bit of help.



The good news is that this is the best season for seeking that extra aid. During the holidays, even more than usual, people are looking for ways to reach out to those who need a helping hand.

There's no shame in asking for and accepting that help. Not only can it help you enjoy the holidays more, letting others assist you will also make them feel good and allow them to live out the true holiday spirit.

Nobody loses and everybody wins.



“Remember, if you ever need a helping hand, you'll find one at the end of your arm. As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands – one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.”

- *Academy Award-winning actress
Audrey Hepburn*

Top Ten Tips # 6

Give Yourself Permission to Enjoy

Should you be happy, laughing with friends at a party, with a special needs child waiting for you back at home? Yes!

Some people seem to think that having a child with a disability means you must always be stressed and depressed.

It's bad enough when other people try to impose that thinking on you, but it's even worse when you do it to yourself. Parents may find themselves feeling guilty for having a good time over the holidays.

But there is no reason to feel guilty; a bit of enjoyment is good for you and, believe it or not, good for your child!

Whether or not there is a disability in a family, parents who take care of themselves – physically and emotionally – are better able to take care of their children.



More than most parents, you need to exercise that self-care. Meeting the challenges of raising a disabled child, you can use all the strength you can get.

So, make sure you've got child care arrangements that you have confidence in, then go to that dinner with friends, that office function or that holiday party.

It will do wonders for your emotional outlook to unload the weight of all your responsibilities for a few hours. By giving yourself permission for joy, you will bring home new and positive energy for your whole family.



“If a man insisted always on being serious, and never allowed himself a bit of fun and relaxation, he would go mad or become unstable without knowing it.”

- *Herodotus, ancient Greek philosopher, circa 440 BC*

Top Ten Tips # 7

Go Where You're Comfortable

The holidays usually offer a wide range of potential activities – everything from small family gatherings to huge office parties and even bigger public celebrations.

Just like you, parents of non-special needs children have to pick and choose which of these events makes sense for their family. They probably have a wider choice, but there will still be limits on what they can do with their kids.

And, just like you, they may feel bad for having to turn down an invitation or skip a party. However, good parents will choose the right and smart thing to do for their families.

In other words, you have every right to decide what holiday events to attend based on your family's needs, regardless of what your relatives, friends, neighbors or anyone else thinks.



If you and your child don't feel comfortable going to a particular event, why should you go?

The same principle applies to entertaining at home. If certain people make you uncomfortable by staring, making remarks or over-reacting to your child's behavior, why even have them in your house?

Invite those who understand your child's condition and support your family. After all, the idea is to enjoy the holidays!



“Never explain – your friends don't need explanations and your enemies won't believe you anyway.”

- Author and essayist *Elbert Hubbard*

Top Ten Tips # 8

Schedule Some “Me Time”

When family and good friends ask you what they should get you for a holiday gift, you can do yourself a huge favor by asking for one thing – a few hours of “me time”.

When was the last time you had a manicure, shot some pool with your buddies, or simply lingered over a cup of coffee without worrying that you have to rush home?

The holiday season can provide you with that chance to refresh and recharge yourself. Many people have time off work and are full of the giving spirit, making this the perfect time to ask friends or family to give you that personal break.

You will know that your child is safe and well-cared for, and that you don't have to pay for child care. Does life get any better than this?



Take full advantage of these opportunities. Do something that you truly enjoy, or that you simply never get the opportunity to do in your busy life.

The simplest way of arranging this kind of break is usually to ask your friends and family to come and take care of your child in your home. Familiar surroundings will make it easier for your child and the caregiver.

Giving you time off with peace of mind is the best present your friends and family can give you – and it won't cost them a dime!



“If you asked me what is the single most important key to longevity, I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension. And if you didn't ask me, I'd still have to say it.”

- *Legendary stage, radio, TV and film star
George Burns*

Top Ten Tips # 9

Reconnect With Your Spouse

Maintaining a healthy and fulfilling marriage or relationship while raising a child with special needs is no easy task. Every relationship needs to be nurtured and cared for but, with the time-consuming and constant demands of having a child with a disability, it often seems impossible.

But a solid marriage can be the foundation of a strong family and a key to helping each family member, including your special needs child, have the best life possible.

Keeping your relationship strong deserves to be a priority. The little time it takes will be well worth it for the added support and confidence you will both enjoy.

This is your partner in a challenging, life-long task. Reforging your connection will help you meet that challenge.



So, go on a date with each other. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive; a movie or a meal at a local restaurant is fine. Take a walk together. Have a conversation about the two of you, without bringing up the kids. It will probably be the first time you've done that in years!

Remember, you were a couple before becoming a family. While our lives change when we become parents, we're still individuals. It's important to stay connected to each other.



“A successful marriage requires falling in love many times – always with the same person.”

- *Mignon McLaughlin, journalist and author of 'The Neurotic's Notebook'*

Top Ten Tips # 10

Your Other Children Are Special, Too

It's been said that every child has special needs. Whether or not they have a disability, all children need and deserve the love and support of their parents, and to know that they hold a special place in your hearts.

So, if you have other children, it's important that you make the holidays a great time for them, as well as for your disabled child.

Siblings often feel neglected or unappreciated because parents tend to spend most of their time managing the needs of their special needs child.

This can become more apparent during the holiday season. Remember, your children are seeing all of the same media portrayals of perfect families that you are.



Over the holidays, participate in an activity or event for just your other children. Pick something they like but often don't get the opportunity to do because your special needs child isn't able to take part.

Take photos or videos with your cell phone so everybody can remember these special times. Put one of those photos up on the fridge or make it your computer's screen saver.

Your other children must know how important and loved they are, and that you understand their needs are special too.



“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

- *Lady Elizabeth Jane Howard, British novelist, actress and model*

BONUS TIP

Make 2020 The Best Year Yet

First, give yourself a pat on the back for surviving 2019! Recognize and reward yourself for being the great parents that you are.

Day in and day out, you are taking care of your special needs child. Thanks to you, they are getting to their doctors' and therapists' appointments. You're the one working with teachers to help ensure your child is getting an appropriate education. Because of you, your child's daily and personal needs are being met with care and love.

You're a rock star in your child's life and he/she would be lost without you. You deserve a medal for the heroic things you do on an everyday basis. Nobody's perfect, but you're pretty great!



So, ring out the old year and bring in the new one on a positive note. Raise a glass of bubbly (or, just as likely, ginger ale!) and make a toast to your family – “Our best times are still ahead!”

And make your New Year's resolution to take better care of yourself – to make your own needs and happiness a priority, along with everyone else's.

You deserve it. And, most importantly, it's the best gift you can give yourself, child and family.



Your Autism Coach, LLC *Helping Parents Help Themselves*

Your Autism Coach, LLC provides comprehensive support programs for parents of special needs children, including individual coaching sessions to address each family's unique challenges and seminars that give parents proven coping strategies and techniques.

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Get the word out!

If you have found the tips in this free booklet to be helpful, please let your family, friends, teachers, therapists and others affected by autism know about it! Feel free to e-mail a copy to them, or direct them to www.YourAutismCoach.com for this and other resources.

Get the help you need!

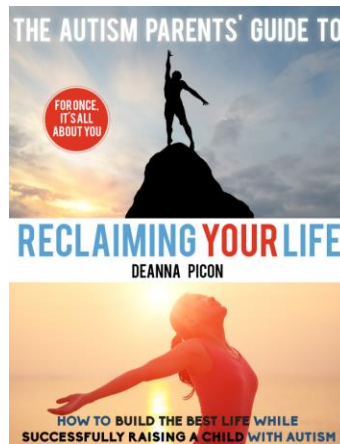
Your Autism Coach, LLC provides comprehensive support programs for parents of special needs children, including individual coaching sessions to address each family's unique challenges and seminars that give parents proven coping strategies and techniques.

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Take the first step to building a better future for you and your family. Begin your journey to greater peace, confidence and control of your life. It all starts here and now...