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*The Huhtanen Family*

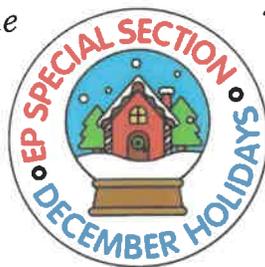


# 7 STRATEGIES FOR RECLAIMING YOUR HOLIDAY MAGIC



BY DEANNA PICON

*Maybe you're walking past the photo studio section in a department store and noticing the joy and excitement of families getting ready to pose for their perfect holiday portraits. Perhaps you are seeing*



*“typical” families in television ads, TV shows or movies. Possibly you overhear your work colleagues planning their standard holiday celebrations that don't have to take any special needs into account.*

For so many of us, moments like that can be triggers. The realization hits you that your family will never pose like the department store photos, act like the “typical” TV families, or be able to have the kind of holiday celebrations that so many others get to enjoy.

I talk to many special needs parents who say these situations unleash difficult emotions such as: loneliness, guilt, sadness and resentment. If you are among those parents, there are two things you should know.

First, your feelings are normal and understandable. You wouldn't be human if the stresses and challenges of parenting special needs children did not get to you occasionally. You are not alone in feeling overwhelmed or sometimes wishing your circumstances were different.

Second, you don't have to stand on the sidelines while the holiday parade passes by. You can take back control of the holiday season for your family and make it just as special and enjoyable as anyone else's.

**“YOU AND YOUR FAMILY NEED TO COME FIRST. THAT MEANS DOING WHAT WORKS FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY, NOT ANYBODY ELSE.”**

## MAKING SPIRITS BRIGHT : PUTTING YOU AND YOUR FAMILY FIRST ON THE PRIORITY LIST

Here are the strategies I use to help special needs parents reclaim their holiday magic:

### 1. EMBRACE THE SPECIAL

Maybe the holiday card version of the holidays is not for you and your family. Very few get those perfect holidays outside of Hollywood fiction. Every family is a bit different. Families like ours are usually a *lot* different, but that's okay. It is who we are. Don't try to shoehorn your family into a standard form that society tells you is the perfect version. Instead, embrace the special nature of your family and aim for holiday celebrations that are perfect for you, regardless of what TV shows or relatives and neighbors think. You and your family need to come first. That means doing what is going to work and be fun for *you* and your family, not anybody else.



mind, when you fall short of your own high standards. Your holiday plan may not be perfect, and the results may not quite match your hopes, but give yourself credit for trying and for caring so much.

### 3. DON'T ISOLATE YOURSELF

Living with additional stress and responsibility can lead some people to become isolated, shutting themselves in, and shutting others out. That's a good recipe for developing depression! We all need to spend time with people we love and who care for us.

That kind of socialization is very important for special needs parents. Even an hour now and then with the people close to your heart will help you recharge your batteries. It can give you the extra energy you need to tackle the holiday opportunities and challenges.



### 4. GO WHERE YOU'RE HAPPY AND WELCOME

The idea of people getting together for the holidays is to enjoy each other's company and strengthen their bonds of friendship and love. If you don't get those benefits from visiting certain people, why go?

Checking an obligation off a list is not worth being surrounded by people who stare and overreact, or who make comments about your child's behavior or your parenting skills. You can choose instead, to be with people who accept you and your family, just the way you are. It's *your* family and you get to pick what's best for you and your family.

You can make it easier for those you're visiting by sharing some thoughts in advance about the sights, sounds or activities that your child has a hard time with, and what they will truly enjoy. Your family and friends aren't mind readers, and your advice and a little advance planning can help them provide a great experience for everyone.

Follow these strategies to Celebrate Your Way and take control of your holiday planning and celebration. You can free yourself from the traditions and expectations of others. Most importantly, you will have put you and your family first on the priority list. These are major accomplishments and should be sources of pride. It's not easy to swim upstream against the images and ideas that you have been bombarded with from society, media, family and other sources. Follow your new holiday plan with joy, good humor and a positive mindset.

I guarantee you that your family will wind up happier and more fulfilled in the long term! •

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Deanna Picon, B.A. is the founder of Your Autism Coach, LLC, which provides personalized guidance, comprehensive support programs and seminars for special needs families. Deanna is a parent of a non-verbal, young man with autism. Her academic credits include a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and a Bachelor of Arts degree in broadcast journalism from Syracuse University. Deanna is the author of *The Autism Parents' Guide to Reclaiming Your Life and Special Needs Holiday Magic: How to Enjoy a Great Holiday Season with Your Autistic Child*. Both are available at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). You can connect with Deanna at [www.yourautismcoach.com](http://www.yourautismcoach.com)

### 5. THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

You don't have to base your plan on the traditional holiday images in your head. Ask yourself what kinds of activities, decorations, foods and people make you and your family happy. Use those things as the basis for forging your own, unique holiday plan. Perhaps you can create a new seasonal tradition such as, getting together with close friends or family for a "holiday brunch" at a friendly, neighborhood restaurant. Maybe your group would like a laid-back potluck dinner, with everyone bringing a dish to share. The results will probably look a lot different than the front of a drug store greeting card, but so what? The standard holiday ideas were not designed for a special needs family, just like the standard education and vacation ideas are probably not for you. By designing your own holidays, you massively boost the odds that all members of your family (including your other children) will have more enjoyment and less stress. That is what you and your family deserve.



### 6. ASK FOR HELP

The holiday season is usually a time of giving, community and spending time with family. This is when people are even more ready than usual to lend others a hand. They're often looking for opportunities to express that holiday spirit, and do something special for their loved ones and others. This is the perfect time of year to be asking your family and friends for those little favors that will



make your holiday planning easier and happier. Accepting that extra empathy and support is not a sign of weakness, but a show of how wonderful your support system is!

Letting others help you will also make them feel good. Whether it is a friend helping you get your Christmas

shopping done, a family member giving you and your spouse a night out before Channukah, or people understanding that your Kwanzaa celebration must have a small, quiet Karamu feast, you may be pleasantly surprised at how much support is out there, waiting for you to ask for it.

You can even ask for the favor or support you need, instead of traditional gifts. If you explain how much more someone's support means to you than any present they can give, you will almost always get a positive response.

### 7. GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO HAVE FUN!

You have serious issues to deal with every day. But having a child with a disability doesn't mean you have to be serious and buttoned-up tight 24/7. Every person needs and deserves to put down the burdens that they carry now and again, and to relax and enjoy themselves. You have nothing to feel bad about or ashamed of if you grab a few hours here and there, strictly for your own needs. Giving yourself that time is not a luxury, but a necessity, if you are going to keep on firing on all cylinders! Every family benefits when the parents take good care of their physical and emotional needs.

