🎄 A Basic Guide to Neurodiversity and Christmas for Supportive Adults

Christmas is often portrayed as a time of joy and excitement, but for a person who is neurodivergent (e.g., Autistic, ADHD, Dyspraxic, etc.), the changes and sensory input of the holidays can be intensely overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.

The core of support is **understanding, planning, and flexibility**.

🧠 What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the concept that differences in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions are simply natural variations, rather than deficits.

A **neurodivergent** person is someone whose brain functions differently from what is considered typical (neurotypical). They process the world—including sensory information, social cues, and routines—in a unique way.

This different way of processing is why the Christmas period can be challenging.

🔴 How Christmas Can Be Overwhelming

The festive season dramatically increases the demands and stimuli that can lead to **sensory overload** and **dysregulation** (a strong, uncontrolled emotional or physical reaction).

Area of Struggle	Why It's Challenging at Christmas
Sensory Overload	**Bright/Flashing Lights:** Christmas lights, especially flashing ones, can be painful or distracting. **Loud Noises:** Christmas music, crackers, noisy toys, and large groups of people talking simultaneously. **Smells & Textures:** Strong smells from candles, perfumes, new decorations, and scratchy/uncomfortable festive clothing (jumpers).
Changes in Routine	The holiday breaks usual schedules (school/work), mealtimes, bedtimes, and locations, which can remove a crucial sense of **predictability** and **control** that many neurodivergent people rely on for emotional stability.

Area of Struggle	Why It's Challenging at Christmas
Social Demands	**Different Environments:** Visiting friends or family where the environment is unfamiliar and they don't know where they can go to for a 'safe space'. **Unfamiliar Guests:** Being around people they don't usually see, or a large number of guests. **Performance Pressure:** The expectation to hug/kiss relatives, say 'thank you' enthusiastically for gifts, or join in games when overwhelmed.
Presents & Food	**Uncertainty of Gifts:** The surprise of a wrapped gift can be stressful. The pressure to fake enthusiasm can cause anxiety. **Food Sensitivities:** Christmas dinner often includes new or unfamiliar foods, textures, and smells, which can be highly distressing for those with rigid food preferences (sometimes called 'safe foods').
Emotional Intensity	Both the stress of the changes and the over-the-top excitement from others can be hard to manage, leading to meltdowns, shutdowns, or total exhaustion (burnout).

☑ Practical Ways to Be Supportive

The goal is to reduce stress and create an environment that accommodates a child's needs, rather than forcing them to conform to traditional expectations. This does not have to mean changing everything just to suit one person. Be mindful that a child's distress or lack of participation is no reflection on you or any other person. Parents of neurodivergent children can also find Christmas really tough but when other adults are supportive, this can make a huge difference.

1. Prioritise Predictability and Control

- **Visual Schedule:** School have provided a Christmas Day plan and a Christmas Day visual timetable. This will help children to get the predictability they need whilst enabling the rest of the family to keep to the traditions that everyone looks forward to.
- You or their parents could draw simple cartoons (stick men are fine) to explain what is going to happen e.g. a trip to the pantomime. Showing pictures of where you are going and what you are going to do can really help manage anxiety and enable a child to enjoy an experience.
- **Maintain Core Routines:** Where possible, stick to usual sleep and mealtimes as much as possible, even on Christmas Day. It is worth discussing this with parents beforehand so everyone is clear and this can be built into a plan.
- **Offer Choices:** Accepting that some children do not find aspects of Christmas enjoyable and letting them opt out of a game or experience will help prevent

meltdowns. If a child is overwhelmed and you need them to make a choice, offer 2 choices only.
- **Agree an Exit Strategy:** Despite everyone's best efforts, a child may still become overwhelmed. Be supportive and understanding if a child needs to leave or temporarily go to a safe space.

2. Manage the Sensory Environment

- **Create a Safe Space:** Designate a specific room (like a bedroom) as a decoration-free, quiet zone where they can retreat when overwhelmed. Putting a few items that help them feel safe and calm e.g. a favourite blanket or a toy will help.
- **Noise Reduction:** Some children need ear defenders or noise-cancelling headphones during loud activities (e.g., gift-opening, large dinners). We would not recommend children use ear defenders all the time (unless advice has been given otherwise) as this can increase sensitivity. Please remember, especially for older children, they may feel self-conscious so it is important not to make it a big deal.
- **Lights and Scents:** It's not always possible to change or remove sensory stimuli that might affect a child but we can be aware that some things that we might like are actually very unpleasant for others. This might trigger unexpected behaviours. Telling a child off when they are in distress due to sensory issues doesn't help. Instead, we have to help them manage that distress. (More on this later)
- **Comfort Over Clothing:** Allow them to wear comfortable, familiar clothes instead of scratchy, 'dressy' Christmas outfits or jumpers.

3. Support Social and Emotional Needs

- **Social Participation:** Some children find this extremely challenging even with people they know and love. It's worth checking with parents what social participation their child can cope with. For example, a child may not be able to cope with hugs or kisses. Could you develop a special wave or a hi five instead?
- **Plan Downtime/Buffers:** Some children are going to need quiet time *before* and *after* big social events (like a walk, quiet time alone, or a day at home with no demands) to help them regulate and recover. If this is the case, please support parents with this.
- **Have an Exit Strategy:** Some children may need an exit strategy that they have agreed with their parents. If you are able to also support with this, it would really help. At school, we sometimes find a child is able to participate more if they know there is an exit strategy available.

4. Food and Gifts

- **"Safe" Food:** Ensure there is always a meal or snack available that you know they will eat, even if it's not traditional Christmas food. Do not pressure them to try new foods and don't be offended if a child cannot eat something or parents supply an alternative.
- **Gifts:** This can be a real challenge for some children. The unpredictability of gifts, the challenge of dealing with something new and the social expectation of what to say to the gift giver (and what they might say back) can make what should be an enjoyable part of Christmas quite stressful. Parents may need to ask what the gift is in advance to manage the anxiety. Some children might not want to be watched or photographed whilst opening the gift. Some children will be anxious about saying thank you as they can't predict what you might say or do in response. Some children may need time to process what they have received so may not appear to be grateful. Being aware of this and considering your own responses can make a huge difference.

5. Supporting a child who is distressed.

- Every child is different so, if possible, talk to the parents beforehand and get their advice for strategies to use.
- As a general rule, any child who is very upset will be unlikely to be able to process what you are saying. Until a child is calm again, your words are not going to go in.
- Start by offering a **distraction**. This can literally be anything that gets their attention.
- Then, provide **deep pressure** (this might be a hug but it could also be achieved by asking a child to push really hard against a wall).
- Finally, engage them in something **rhythmic**. This could be singing, clapping, hopping from one leg to the other, bouncing or catching a ball – basically any activity that involves a rhythm.

- **Remember: A successful Christmas is a calm, low-stress Christmas.** It doesn't have to look like the movies or meet anyone else's expectations. Focus on what brings genuine peace and comfort to your family.
