



The Christmas Dilemma

Family gatherings for the holidays are a mixed blessing for families with autistic children. However supportive other members of the family are, any change can be upsetting to an autistic child — even happy changes, such as Christmas morning can bring on anxiety and major meltdowns.

A written schedule and low expectations can help minimize upset. Help extended family members remember to keep it low-key. This is not the time for Grandma to insist on eye contact!

One of the hardest parts of Christmas with children on the

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Books

Do you have a book that really spoke to you about parenting a child on the Autism Spectrum? Please let us know!

Some recent favorites for us:

* *A Regular Guy: Growing Up with Autism* by Laura Shumaker

* *Look at My Eyes* by Seth & Melanie Fowler

* *Be Different: Adventures of a Free-Range Aspergian* by John Robison

The Christmas Dilemma (Continued)

Autism Spectrum can be the excitement and expectation of other children in the family. A common refrain to hear among siblings of an autistic child? Why do they have to act like that? They're ruining Christmas!

The same is true when it comes to Christmas Eve or Christmas Day services. Because they are slightly different from a regular Sunday, they can be upsetting. So we make extra effort to use family worship practices, such as the Advent Wreath we light and prayers we read every night in Advent.

Can Christmas be ruined?

I believe that family gatherings belong to the whole family and not a faction. So my child will participate in all extended family gatherings *to the extent that he is comfortable*.

For example, we hold an Open House party every year for friends and family. My Aspie son is encouraged

to greet everyone who comes. At the same time, he has a "safe place" (this year it was his room) where he can retreat when he is overwhelmed. A sign on the door makes it clear in a humorous way that he is not to be disturbed. He comes and goes as his comfort permits.

If anyone comments on his presence or absence, we simply smile and shrug. He's a member of this family, and just as his sister and I delight in chatting up all comers, so too he needs solitude. Just as I needn't apologize for preferring Hershey Kisses to gumdrops, so I feel families needn't apologize for promoting the comfort and stability of their autistic child.

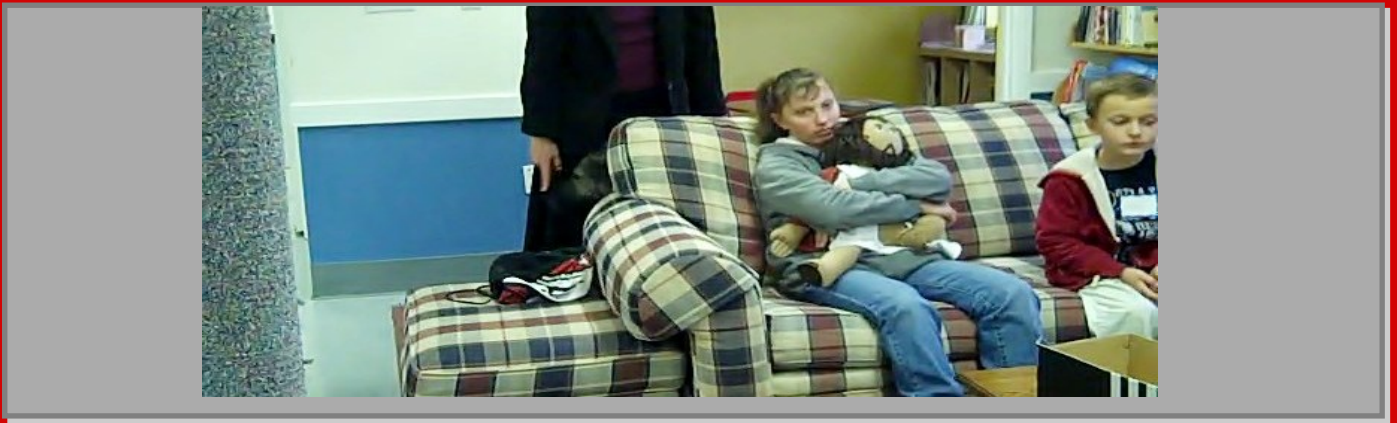
Rhythms of Grace was born from a family's desire to be "in church" while recognizing all of the difficulties. There is no judgment on families that cannot be consistent, or who have not yet been able to attend. You are now and will always be part of this family.



Slow Down, Friends Say

Here's some great tips from our Twitter friends on how to handle the inevitable anxiety and discomfort caused by the exciting events of Christmas and New Year's celebrations:

- Remember Christmas is a season—12 days — you don't have to do it all at once.
- We open presents one at a time over the whole course of the day. Its less confusing and less overwhelming
- New Year's Eve is confusing for my daughter so we make an hour by hour "calendar" (including regular bed times) with wishes for the New Year. Then she can follow along
- Being off his regular school schedule is very hard so we try to have an activity set up that imitates his school schedule.
- Talking to other parents is such a god-send—only another autism parent "gets" it!



Why doesn't my child like Christmas?

I've found that one of the most difficult aspects of this season with autistic children to understand is the anxiety it can cause. While many people experience holiday "blues," autistic children often experience a sharp increase in anxiety.

Most of us have "bought" the basic premise that humans seek pleasure and avoid pain. For autistic children, expectation isn't pleasurable, it's painful. Security and sameness, as dull as it may be for neurotypical children, is what most autistic children find pleasurable.

As parents of autistic children, we know how hard it is to keep things "the same" during the holidays, and school break. Here are some things that might help:

1. Create traditions. Write down those Christmas and school break traditions that the whole family enjoy AND that can be duplicated.

Then give or read the list to your child as the holidays approach. For instance, one of our family traditions is the Advent Calendar. Starting December 1, the children open a little door to find a riddle. Once they solve the riddle, they will find a treat — a piece of candy, a small toy. The riddles play to my son's strengths in puns and wordplay, while giving him a shape to his mornings, even when there is no school or activity planned.

2. Minimize fears. We use flowcharts to cover the "what-ifs?" Some flowcharts we have created: What do I do if I don't like a gift? What do I do if someone didn't get me a present? And my favorite—How to say Thank You's graciously. (I'm happy to share flowcharts, just email rebecblack@gmail.com to request.

SPOTLIGHT on volunteers

Meet "Ms G"

Jane Giovannucci is well-known at Epiphany Episcopal Church. She is "Ms G" and her Level I Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Atrium is "Ms. G's Room," or sometimes "Jesus's room."

"The atrium is a community in which children and adults live together a religious experience which facilitates participation in the wider community of the family, the church and other social spheres. " — Catechesis of the Good Shepherd www.cgusa.org

Jane's experience, as well as her big heart, make her a vital part of the Rhythms of Grace volunteer family



Feeling Good About US

Rhythms of Grace—A Special Grace is a community of support. Jesus gave his people the mission to love one another. We believe that loving one another means realizing the best potential of each individual, and supporting families in their journey.

A place for the whole family to worship together

To Learn More About Rhythms of Grace

Search our website: www.ASpecialGrace.com

Or email us at: ASpecialGrace@gmail.com

Or “like” us on Facebook!

**Rhythms of Grace takes place on the
First Sunday of each month**

2pm—3pm

Epiphany Episcopal Church, 62 Front St., Walpole, MA

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Rhythms of Grace

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