

10 Sensory Tips for the Holidays



1. Prepare your child in advance.

Using social stories or children's books about holiday parties and family gatherings can help children know what to expect. Visual schedules can also be helpful. Talk to your child in advance about who's going to be there and what you'll be doing while you're there. Children with sensory processing challenges LOVE schedules, so preparation is key!

2. Know and honor your child's limits.

The bright lights and sounds, new smells, and different environments that are common during the holidays are extremely challenging for children with sensory differences. While it's fine to encourage your child to step out of their comfort zone, it's important to recognize and respect when your kiddo has hit their sensory threshold. Allow them to say "no" and/or take a break when they are feeling overwhelmed.

3. Keep your schedule as normal as possible.

Kiddos who have sensory challenges do best with routines they know and keeping routines consistent can be really tricky during the holiday season. If you know that you're going to have a full day, prepare your kiddo by letting them know the schedule for the day, a visual schedule is great here, and attempt to keep at least one daily routine the same. Allow them to say "no" and/or take a break when they are feeling overwhelmed.

4. Create and use a sensory diet, or provide deep pressure input before and after outings.

Use this approach before holiday shopping, parties, or any time you know your kiddo will be pushed to a sensory threshold. You can also use weighted items like blankets or vests to provide some calming sensory input. Reach out to [Project SOOTHe](https://www.projectsoothe.org/) if you think your child could benefit from a weighted sensory item!

10 Sensory Tips for the Holidays



5. Provide short sensory breaks.

Providing a 10-minute break every hour or so in a quiet space – or taking a short walk outside, can help reset your child’s nervous system, and help them reach a “just right” state of arousal. This can help prevent sensory overload that can lead to meltdowns.

6. Model regulation techniques.

Listen to your own sensory preferences and normalize these for your child. For example, if a gathering is noisy or there are too many people, you can say, “Wow. I’m feeling a little overwhelmed by all the people and noise. I’m going to go outside and take five deep breaths.” This helps your kiddo learn that it’s ok to not be ok, and that they can take a break if they need to!

7. Create a calming space.

Try to ensure there is a safe space, both at home and at new places, where your child can go if they are feeling overwhelmed and need a sensory break. If you’re not going to be home, bring a few of their favorite calming tools and/or sensory items along. When you first arrive, show your child where this safe space is and let them know they can go there if they need some down time or a calming break.

8. Identify a safe word or signal that lets your child know it’s time to step away and reset.

This can be any word, and either you or your kiddo can use it to communicate that it’s time to take a sensory break. At our house, we use “jelly bean”.

9. Bring some of your child’s favorite activities and foods.

Kids with sensory processing challenges often become anxious when they are in a new environment they can’t control and things they are familiar with aren’t there. When visiting friends or relatives, bring toys that your child loves or finds comforting. Since different smells, textures, new foods, and even using different dishes or silverware can be stressful and overwhelming, bring along foods they like, possibly even silverware and dishes they are used to using. This can go a long way in preempting a sensory meltdown.

10. Help educate others.

One of the toughest parts of being a sensory parent is helping others understand that sensory kids can “look just fine” when they actually aren’t fine. Let friends and family know that music, bright lights, strong smells (like perfume, scented candles, and new foods), unexpected touch, and even hugs may be very difficult, painful, or overstimulating for your child. Advocating for your child and teaching others the differences between “sensory” and “behavior” Issues is an ongoing necessity for us as parents of a sensory kid. If you’d like some recommendations for some great books about sensory processing challenges, [contact Project SOOTHe](#). We’re here to support you in your sensory journey.