



Not Just Surviving the Holidays: A guide for parents, grandparents, and friends to use while supporting persons with disabilities through this season of celebration and change.

Tips from CLC Network consultant and author Barbara J. Newman.

While Thanksgiving and Christmas often bring up those Hallmark memories for many of us, for some children and adults with disabilities, holidays signal an intense time of stress and distress. Often communicated with significant behavior changes, the underlying message might be “I’m overwhelmed”, “You changed my schedule”, “Why did you put a tree in our living room”, “There are too many people stuffed into this room”, or “I am on complete sensory overload”.

While all of these ideas won’t work with all people, here are some strategies for families and friends to try as you create a positive time of celebration for each family member.

1. Find some pictures of the celebration from last year. If it will be similar, put together a photo album or story of that event so that the individual can remember it in pictures and written words prior to attending a similar event this year.
2. Put together a schedule of events for your party. Whether in words and/or pictures, let the person know the planned order. Some individuals enjoy crossing off or removing the individual schedule items as they are completed.
3. Many times we redecorate or rearrange rooms to fit more people. If, for example, a larger group will be gathering at grandma and grandpa’s house, consider setting it up a day ahead and visiting that room without people in it. Let the individual explore the changes without the added stress of people. Perhaps leave something on a chair or in a certain place so that you can “reserve a spot” for the event when you arrive. The individual will know to find that space or item to make a more comfortable entry.
4. Give that individual a “job” to do. Perhaps you could assign an individual to be the photographer, back massager, coffee or beverage server, greeter (be the first to arrive and assimilate guests more slowly – often a better choice for some persons), or card distributor. Many times, a helping role will not only use the gifts of an individual, but it gives the person a clear sense of what to do in that environment.
5. Designate a “safe zone”. It might be helpful to show that family member a quiet and designated space in the home or building where there would be a calming and preferred activity. It might be a mini tramp, rocking chair, a favorite book, or quiet classical music in a more isolated space where one might be able to find a refuge if the senses get overloaded.
6. Who needs to know? Many times extended families get together, and yet cousins or friends may not really understand the individual with the disability. It might be helpful for parents or the person with the disability to send out a quick update to family members prior to an event that includes such topics as “How Brent has grown this year”, “Activities and topics Brent enjoys doing or discussing”, “Activities and topics to avoid with Brent”, “Some things that Brent may really enjoy when we gather for Thanksgiving”, “Some things that might be challenging for Brent at our Thanksgiving celebration” “Some gifts Brent might enjoy receiving” “Some gifts to avoid”. Giving information in advance can be a powerful way to put people at ease while also arming well-meaning relatives with some quick strategies to try.
7. “It is better to give than to receive” – and many times we think our family member with a disability should only be the recipient of gifts, and not the giver. How important it is for all of us to have a chance to give. How can that person use an area of interest or gifting to provide something for others? Would it be the gift of a dance or song? Could that individual provide the cookies for dessert? Might that person enjoy a trip to a dollar store to pick out something for each guest or family member? What about a wall decoration or a note card for each guest with a favorite picture of an animal or area of interest? Find a way for that individual to also receive the joy of giving!

8. Think in advance of a way your family member can participate in the holiday traditions. Do you collect prayer requests or notes indicating things for which each family member is thankful to incorporate into the celebration? How might that family member participate? Would it be helpful to have pictures of familiar items so that the individual can point to or pick up the prayer request and hand it to the one praying? How about singing? Could you have a colorful streamer or small rhythm instrument available so that a person without words could participate with movement? How about programming a portion of Luke 2 on an iPad or other device so that pushing a button will allow an individual to read a portion of the Bible? Adding figures or using the manger scene on the mantel may be a way for an individual to better understand or even help move or tell the Christmas story. Be creative. Think of ways you have made the holiday meaningful and consider ways your family member with a disability may be involved.

Hopefully, some of these ideas will allow you to prepare in advance and begin to build some positive holiday experiences for each family member!

CHRISTMAS SUGGESTIONS

How does one select a good gift for a child with a disability? While toy stores abound with choices, what might be the best one?

First, it's important to remember the child's interests and joys. While the child may need practice in fine motor skills, embedding that task in a topic or activity the child LOVES to do might have a greater impact on the child. A child who loves trains, for example, may be much more likely to use a particular coloring book if it's focused on Thomas the Tank Engine. A child who enjoys music may want to practice finger strengthening to songs and fingerplays with motions and movements. Loving the computer, a child may interact best with an iPad that has specific applications downloaded for finger dexterity or handwriting practice. Pair the area of practice with an area of love or strength.

Secondly, don't automatically assume technology is the best choice. While that is certainly a great tool, a child's hands will grow stronger by squishing play dough than by moving a computer mouse. A child will best learn language and social skills by playing an actual game of Candyland or Connect 4 at the kitchen table as opposed to downloading it on the computer. Hearing stories by Dr. Seuss or nursery rhyme books while nestled on someone's lap will be a terrific way to learn rhymes and other important reading skills.

Also, check with the staff at the school your child attends. Are there activities or toys that work well with the child in that environment? They may have some great and specific suggestions for you.

Finally, there are always two parts to giving a child a new item. First, the child opens the gift, and second there is some kind of training or teaching that needs to happen to allow the child to use the gift. So often we put something in the hands of a child and expect the child to automatically know how to use it. Plan to have a time to work with the child and play with the child, using the toy or activity together. After all, time spent together is always the best gift a child can receive! Use the new gift as an excuse to do that together.

So, get a picture of the child's gift and interest areas as well as areas of need in your head and see if any of these suggestions might fit the general principals mentioned above...

Fine Motor:

- Great stocking stuffers might be vibrating pens, play dough or clay, new crayons or pencils, craft items such as beads for stringing, dot paints, Wikki Stix, pipe cleaners, or craft kits appropriate to the child's level.
- Larger items could include pegboards, building blocks, Lego kits, puzzles, items for sorting, dress-up clothes or costumes (with fasteners to practice snapping, zipping, and buttons), Lite-Brite, finger cymbals, Operation, Tiddlywinks, Barrel of Monkeys, and toys with switches or push button activation.
- For older children, consider actual toolbox or cooking kits that allow individuals to measure, mix, stir, hammer, sprinkle, or knead.

Reading Development:

- Books are a wonderful gift!!! For children who are beginning readers, patterned books are a great choice. For example, *Goodnight Moon* and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* are patterns that children can soon "read". To increase language development as well as rhyming skills, try books that are songs. For example, *The Wheels on the Bus*, *5 Little Monkeys*, and *Old MacDonald* are all great for participation. Nursery Rhyme books and Dr. Seuss teach rhyming. Some children may also enjoy recordings of favorite books or books featuring a topic or area of interest.

- Refrigerator letter magnets are very helpful for children! Using them on a cookie sheet works well too.
- Magna Doodles are wonderful ways to practice words and drawings.
- Some computer programs or iPad applications have some excellent reading programs that not only highlight words as they are spoken aloud, but also have comprehension activities with them. Also consider the LeapPad or VTech options. They are a bit more durable than a typical computer.
- For more capable readers, Mad Libs, Balderdash, and a subscription to an age-appropriate magazine may be a terrific choice.

Math Development:

Counting games abound. Here are some favorites: Hi Ho Cheerio, Chutes and Ladders, Yahtzee, Racko, Uno, Playing cards for Crazy 8s and War, Connect 4, Rummikub, Dominoes, Life, Monopoly, or any other game requiring counting and moving. Match the math required to the skill level of the child.

Also consider real life math applications such as measuring tools, a calculator, a bank account to begin managing money, clocks or watches, and personal calendars and planners.

Language (Speech) Development:

- Some great stocking stuffers might include bubbles, special straws, or a gift card for really thick shakes at a local fast food restaurant.
- Try getting some "action required" CDs and DVDs for children. Allowing children to sing along and move along to a children's worship or music group can be a great way to learn new words while getting some movement at the same time.
- Puppets and stuffed animals are also a great way to encourage language skills.
- Consider a gift of a "field trip" to someplace special so that you can talk about it before you go, talk while you are there, and look at the photos you took while visiting and talk about it when you get home.
- Think about a digital camera so that the child can take pictures of many special items and then organize the pictures in books to show and tell to others.
- A microphone or karaoke machine also encourages speech.
- Outburst, Catch Phrase, and Apples to Apples are terrific games to encourage speech and language development.
- Once again, the gift of a book is a powerful speech development tool.

Gross Motor Development:

Don't forget items like balls, jump ropes, walking stilt cups, indoor golf or hockey games, ring toss games, punching bags, toss and catch games, a mini-tramp, scooter, indoor exercise bike or treadmill. Certainly a Wii fit has revolutionized many with ways to exercise and move at home. These are all great for gross motor development as well as support for some sensory systems.

iPads and other technology:

What an exciting tool this is for children growing up today. If a child already has access to an iPad, consider purchasing a gift card for applications. If not, perhaps everyone can pool their money to get an iPad for a child. The possibilities are nearly endless for skill development. If a child already has a favorite piece of technology such as a computer or iPod, you can almost always find new gift applications for the child to enjoy.

While this list is certainly not exhaustive, perhaps it has helped to get your creative juices flowing.

CONSIDER doing some holiday shopping at CLC Network’s online store or at the CLC Network offices located at 4340 Burlingame Ave. SW, Wyoming, MI 49509

Tired of being the bad guy? Eager for better transitions? Consider this **Time Timer** to help individuals who struggle with an inner sense of “10 minutes” to visually watch 10 minutes disappear. Set it for computer time, TV time, dinner time at the table. When the red is gone, time is up. This timer also allows you to turn the sound off if desired for those with more sensitive ears.

Price is \$35



The **Inclusion Tool Kit** offers some favorite items for those who may struggle with handwriting, attention, or reading. Some of our consultant’s favorite tools are included in this kit, allowing a child new avenues of support for these areas. Instructions for use are included in the kit.

Price is \$20



Fidget Pencils. This set of 3 pencils is a great way to keep hands moving and busy so the mind is free to think. Even some adults enjoy storing these away for those longer meetings or gatherings.

Price is \$10

Body Building: Devotions to Celebrate Inclusive Community, written by Barbara J. Newman. Enjoy this book with all ages as you hear stories of the gifts persons with disabilities bring to our communities. Consider choosing your favorite to read aloud at a family celebration this year.

Price is \$12

***As a family, consider giving a gift to the children’s ministry department of your church. Partner with us to get these important tools into the hands of those who need them most. We will do our part by attractively packaging and discounting the items so that you can give a gift that can significantly support the church’s efforts to include children with disabilities. We can ship this to your home or designated church with a note indicating your interest and support in allowing that church to benefit from the joys of including children with disabilities.

Package includes the following:

- Autism and Your Church, second edition by Barbara J. Newman
- Body Building: Devotions to Celebrate Inclusive Community by Barbara J. Newman
- Church Welcome Story by Barbara J. Newman
- G.L.U.E. Training Manual by Kimberley Luurtsema and Barbara J. Newman
- Helping Kids Include Kids with Disabilities by Barbara J. Newman
- Inclusion Awareness Kit
- Inclusion Tool Kit
- Your Feet, My Shoes by Sarah Bolt

Valued at \$180, this Children’s Ministry Kit will be available online for \$125 until December 21, 2011.