10 Tips for Surviving the Holidays: A Tool Guide when you have Down Syndrome

By Shana Sexton, LCSW

It's holiday time and many people are busy decorating, baking cookies, shopping and planning family celebrations. As exciting as this time is, the holidays can be difficult for many people with Down syndrome. There are often significant changes in routine and breaks from school or day program. There are visits with relatives who may be unfamiliar. Siblings who have moved out return home. The holidays may also bring up memories of loved ones who have passed away and are no longer part of the celebrations. The holidays can also be a difficult time for people in group homes who don't have a lot of family involvement but see their housemates who are able to spend time with family over the holidays. Here are ten ways to help someone with Down syndrome enjoy the holidays and make it a merrier time for all!

1) Prepare for changes in schedules and routines. Many of our patients benefit from using a visual calendar with pictures for dates when they will be visiting family, when school or day program will not be in session or when siblings will be at home.

2) Try to avoid activities you know are going to be stressful when possible. If someone is sensitive to crowds, it would be better to complete the last minute Christmas Eve mall trip when that person is not with you.

3) If you are going to a large family gathering, make sure there is a space where the person with Down syndrome can take a break from the crowd if necessary. Some people with Down syndrome are very sensitive to noise and crowds or may just feel overwhelmed with the need to socialize with many relatives they do not see very often.

4) Make a book with pictures of relatives and friends the person may see at holiday gatherings. Spend some time before the gathering going through the book with the person and naming each person and their relationship. Remind the person about when they last saw this friend or relative and what they did together to help them remember more about the person when they see them at the holiday gathering.

5) Spend some time role playing with the person with Down syndrome prior to the holiday gathering. Talk about some topics to discuss with someone you haven't seen for a while. Practice some questions the person could ask and some questions they may be asked and what they could say. If the person has limited verbal skills, you could make a book with pictures of some people and places in the person's life for them to share with friends and family. This may make it easier for the person to interact and be part of the holiday gathering.

6) Stay alert for signs of anxiety or agitation. Try to catch this early so that you can help the person with Down syndrome take a few minutes to calm down and relax. You may want to try some of the relaxation techniques I talked about in my post in July.
7) A person with Down syndrome may enjoy a repetitive activity, like stringing popcorn for the tree, making decorative construction paper chains, spinning a Dreidel or spooning cookie dough onto a cookie sheet. An activity like this can help a person manage anxiety. This would be a good activity to try if you start to notice the person becoming anxious. It also still allows the person to take part in the holiday celebrations.

8) People with Down syndrome often enjoy helping others. Focusing on a helpful task often helps manage anxiety. Give the person a helpful task to do at the holiday gathering, like setting the table, collecting the wrapping paper, organizing the gifts or keeping young nieces and nephews busy.

9) Make sure there will be food choices at the gathering to meet the person's dietary needs. Many of our patients follow a gluten free diet or have other dietary restrictions. It may be difficult for them if everyone else is enjoying food and they have few choices. Issue likes this can set off a behavioral problem.

10) Remember to relax, have fun and let go of perfection. People with Down syndrome are often very aware of when others are feeling stressed. If parents or caregivers are feeling stressed and anxious about how holiday celebrations will go, that will only magnify the stress the person with Down syndrome may be feeling because of the changes and excitement around the holidays. Remember that the holidays will come again next year and it's okay if everything doesn't go perfectly. The important thing is that the family has had a chance to connect and share the holiday together and that the person with Down syndrome has been able to be part of it in whatever way best fits their needs.