MAKING THE FESTIVE SEASON MORE INCLUSIVE

A practical guide for families, friends and communities supporting children with Down syndrome, autism and other neurodevelopmental differences.

A season for everyone

The festive season is often filled with parties, family gatherings, school celebrations, music, food, travel and time with loved ones. These experiences can be exciting, but changes in routine, unfamiliar environments, noise, crowds and different foods can also feel overwhelming for some children.

OUR REMINDER
Every child deserves to be included, but inclusion doesn't mean everyone has to participate in the same way.

Inclusion shouldn't rest entirely on a child or their family having to adapt. Families, friends and hosts also have a role to play in creating celebrations where everyone feels welcome.



1. Before the celebration: help children know what to expect

Uncertainty can make new experiences more difficult. Preparing children in advance can help them feel more comfortable and confident.

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- Talk about where you are going, who will be there and what might happen.
- Use photographs, short videos or visual schedules to introduce unfamiliar places and people.
- Explain planned activities, particularly if there will be music, singing, games or performances.
- Where possible, let children know how long the event is likely to last.
- Consider visiting an unfamiliar venue beforehand or showing your child photographs of it.
- Bring familiar comfort items, toys or other things that help your child feel settled.

FOR HOSTS
If you're inviting a family with a child who has additional needs, share details about the venue, activities, music and timings beforehand. This gives parents an opportunity to prepare their child.

2. Think about sensory experiences

Festive celebrations can be full of sensory stimulation. Bright decorations, flashing lights, loud music, balloons, strong smells, crowded rooms and lots of conversation can be difficult for some children to process. Sensory preferences differ from child to child, so it's important to understand what works for each individual.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Keep music at a comfortable volume and avoid sudden, unnecessarily loud sounds.
- Provide a quieter space where children can take a break.
- Allow children to use ear defenders or noise-reducing headphones if helpful.
- Be mindful of flashing lights, strong fragrances and other potentially overwhelming sensory experiences.
- Don't insist that children join noisy group activities.
- Allow children to move around, take breaks or step away when they need to.

FOR HOSTS
You don't have to redesign your entire celebration. Sometimes one quieter room, turning down the music or making space away from the crowd can make a meaningful difference.



3. Make room for different ways to participate

Not every child enjoys parties, group games, dancing, singing or being the centre of attention. Some may prefer to observe before joining in. Others may participate briefly or enjoy an activity on their own. These are all valid ways of being part of a celebration.

- Don't insist that children dance, sing, perform or join group activities.
- Allow children to watch before deciding whether they want to join in.
- Offer different ways to take part, including quieter or individual activities.
- Avoid drawing unnecessary attention to a child's decision not to participate.
- Respect a child's communication, including gestures, signs, communication devices or other ways of expressing themselves.
- Celebrate participation on the child's own terms.

FOR HOSTS
Instead of asking, “Why isn't he joining in?”, consider asking, “Is there another way we can make this enjoyable for him?”

4. Be thoughtful about food and mealtimes

Food is often a big part of festive celebrations. However, unfamiliar dishes, different textures, smells and changes to mealtime routines can make eating challenging for some children.

- Ask parents about their child's food preferences and any dietary requirements.
- Include familiar food options alongside new dishes.
- Avoid pressuring children to taste unfamiliar foods.
- Don't comment negatively on what a child chooses to eat or refuses.
- Allow children to eat at their own pace.
- Where appropriate, let families bring familiar food from home.

5. Respect personal space and individual boundaries

Festive gatherings often involve affection, photographs, greetings and physical contact. Not every child is comfortable with hugs, kisses, handshakes or being touched by unfamiliar people.

- Don't insist that children hug or kiss relatives as a greeting.
- Ask before touching or picking up a child.
- Respect a child's need for personal space.
- Avoid forcing eye contact or demanding verbal responses.
- Ask permission before taking or sharing photographs.
- Don't assume what is polite or appropriate for every child.

FOR HOSTS
Teach family members, particularly children, to respect personal boundaries. A wave, smile or simple hello can be just as meaningful as a hug.

6. Help family and friends understand

Sometimes the biggest challenge isn't the celebration itself, but the expectations and misunderstandings that surround it. Parents shouldn't have to spend an entire gathering explaining or defending their child's behaviour.

- Ask parents privately if there is anything that would help their child enjoy the event.
- Avoid making assumptions about what a child can or cannot do.
- Don't compare one child's behaviour or development with another's.
- Resist the urge to offer unsolicited parenting advice.
- Understand that a child may need to leave early, take breaks or change activities unexpectedly.
- Be patient and allow families to manage situations in the way that works for them.

FOR HOSTS
An invitation is only the beginning of inclusion. Making families feel genuinely welcome, without judgement or pressure, is what makes the difference.

A LITTLE REMINDER FOR PARENTS

Amid all the preparation that goes into making the festive season enjoyable for our children, remember to look after yourselves too. You don't have to attend every gathering, stay until the end of every party or meet everyone else's expectations. Choose the experiences that work for your family. Give yourself permission to leave early, change plans or say no.

A successful celebration doesn't have to look like everyone else's.
Sometimes the best memories are made in the simplest moments.

A STORY THAT STARTS A CONVERSATION



I Don't Like the Birthday Song · Ugo & Sim Sim

Celebrations can be joyful, but some familiar traditions aren't enjoyable for every child. Our book explores how something as familiar as singing Happy Birthday can feel uncomfortable for a child. It's a gentle way to introduce conversations about sensory preferences, understanding differences and respecting how other children experience everyday celebrations.

Explore the Ugo & Sim Sim book collection and find ordering information on our website:
simones-oasis.org/our-books/

LET'S MAKE ROOM FOR EVERYONE

Inclusion isn't about getting every child to fit into our celebrations. It's about creating celebrations that make room for every child. Share this guide with your family, friends, schools and anyone planning a festive celebration.

SIMONE'S OASIS FOUNDATION
Stories that inspire understanding. Creating a world where every child belongs.
simones-oasis.org | @simonesoasis

BEFORE YOU HOST

A checklist for making festive celebrations more inclusive

A little preparation can make a big difference. If you're hosting a Christmas party, family gathering, school celebration or community event, use this checklist to help make everyone feel welcome.

BEFORE THE EVENT

☐ Have I asked whether any guests have specific needs or preferences?

☐ Have I shared details about the venue, activities, music and timings in advance?

☐ Is there a quieter space available for anyone who needs a break?

☐ Have I considered lighting, music volume, strong smells and other sensory experiences?

☐ Are there familiar food options and alternatives for different dietary needs?

☐ Have I considered accessibility and how guests will move around the space?

DURING THE CELEBRATION

☐ Am I allowing children to participate in their own way, without pressure?

☐ Are there quieter activities available alongside louder group activities?

☐ Am I respecting children's personal space and communication preferences?

☐ Are family members and other guests being mindful of different needs?

☐ Can guests take breaks or leave early without feeling uncomfortable?

☐ Am I avoiding unnecessary attention or judgement when a child needs support?

MOST IMPORTANTLY
Have I created an environment where every child and family feels genuinely welcome?

A FINAL REMINDER

Inclusion isn't about making everyone do the same thing. It's about making sure everyone has the opportunity to feel comfortable, respected and included.

A little understanding goes a long way.

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