

While the winter holidays can be a great time to relax and recharge, they can also bring challenges for children and young people with special needs and their families.

Often the lack of familiarity, structure and routine, normally created by the school day, and the changes resulting from Christmas approaching can create anxiety leading to differences in behaviour that may be difficult to manage for the young person and those around them.

# Tips for Christmas dinner

## Visualise it

Plan a menu of what they would like to eat and go over it a week before Christmas so they are prepared. Younger children may enjoy drawing or collaging their meal on a paper plate. Older ones might like using a menu template. You can let them choose recipes, and cook the meal the day before to try it out. Take a photo of it as a visual reminder.

## Stick to the usual

If possible, stick to the same meal times as usual. If not, prepare them with a Social Story, add it to their visual schedule for the day, or have snacks ready.

## Go safe

If they dislike traditional foods, it could be an opportunity to choose their favourite foods as a celebration meal.

## Be aware

Large gatherings can be stressful. Be aware of sensory overload like noise levels, crackers and party poppers and smells.

## Be consistent

If you dress the table, keep their usuals. They might prefer to sit in the same spot, use the same plates and cutlery.

## Alternative arrangements

They might prefer eating alone or separately with TV on. This could help 'mask' the noise from the dinner table and reduce social pressures.

## Prepare

If visiting others, prepare them for different meal times, where they will eat and what's on the menu. They may prefer a packed lunch to take with them just in case.

## Plan B

Discuss whether they would like to eat all or part of their dinner with everyone else. Suggest sitting closest to the door, so if things become overwhelming they can have some time away. You could set up a secondary dinner area just for them in another room. They may choose things to take away with them during this time (like toys, favourite object, or sensory items)