5 Tips for Holiday Shopping with Children on the Autism Spectrum

It's that time of year again. The holidays are here, and it is time to shop until we drop. (Or at least until we are finished spending). Shopping malls are decorated with bright colorful lights, trees, Santa, elves and more. Let's not forget the record breaking crowds! While festive, this can be over stimulating for children on the spectrum. Here are some suggestions for making shopping more fun and comfortable for you and your child on the autism spectrum.

1. Stay Organized

Start with a written schedule that is a visual checklist the child can follow along with. The shopping trip can be a lot easier if you are organized. During the holidays, it is very easy to stray off to the big sales, browse and get distracted. However, knowing what you are going in for, and grabbing those items will help your child from feeling overwhelmed in this environment. Try and make a list of the stores you are going to and list the things you need from those stores. For example, you can plan to purchase no more than 10 items from a particular store and stick to that plan. Even stay organized in your travel time to the stores. Stick to a plan with a limited amount of car time and involve your child in the planning process.

2. Start with Smaller Stores

Consider gradually introducing your child into the bigger stores, rather than at the very beginning. For example, start with shops that are small, with less intense decorations and noise, then work your way up. See how this goes. It should help you determine if the larger department stores are a possibility for you and your child. The experience of a small store may be less stressful for you and your child. Also, smaller shops tend to have shorter lines. It is really important to avoid long lines and keep moving.

3. Try Multiple Shorter Trips, Instead of One Long Trip

It may help to take several shorter trips, than to have one, day long marathon of shopping. Breaking it up may be very helpful for planning too. With all of the noise, flashing lights and busyness of the mall this time of year, short trips can help your child handle this activity. You can also supplement some of the onsite shopping, with online shopping. This is always an option, and can be even more time effective, and productive. You can involve your child in this form of holiday shopping as well.

4. Find a Quiet Zone

It is a good idea to scope out a quiet zone as a break area just in case your child needs a breather from shopping, and the busy areas. Choose a less populated area of the mall. Find this spot ahead

of time, so that you can get to it quickly in the event of a meltdown or any problems. If possible, go shopping during off hours when it is less busy, and these zones will be more available to you.

5. Inquire About Sensory Friendly Activities

Many malls and shopping centers have sensory friendly holiday events, and Santa. Check with your local malls or park districts. Sensory friendly Santa is becoming incredibly popular this year. These events have great consideration for children on the spectrum such as Santa speaking in a quieter voice, and more subtle "Ho ho hos." Also, the staff recognizes that children with special needs may not want to be touched. The child may stand, sit or be near Santa and not necessarily be on his lap unless they so choose. If your community does not offer a sensory friendly Santa event, try the traditional Santa events. However, see if there is a store or location with a more private, quieter setting. You also may want to make the Santa visit your first activity of the day, so patience does not wear out.

Holiday shopping and activities can be challenging, but they can be done. Just take your time, plan ahead and enjoy the season!

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