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The HANDS (Helping Answer Needs by Developing Specialists) in Autism Program and Resource Center is affiliated with the Christian Sarkine Autism Treatment Center at Riley at IU Health and the IU School of Medicine. This Center is currently supported in part from grants from IU Health as well as from the Indiana Department of Education. The IDOE funding is to support the HANDS in Autism as one of six Indiana Resource Network resource and training centers designed to provide coordinated technical assistance to schools and communities across the state. Supported also by a number of charitable and philanthropic donations, the HANDS program offers a variety of live and online training opportunities free to educational and medical professionals, service providers, and parents.

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# HOLIDAY TIPS

*for Families of Individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder*

[www.HANDSinAutism.org](http://www.HANDSinAutism.org)

The holiday season can put a lot of stress on all of us. However it is no less stressful for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), because holidays bring in a break into the daily routine that needs to be taken into consideration. So what can you do?

### **Step 1: Prepare the individual for change**

Such a preparation in advance can be done in a number of ways. You can create social stories about the upcoming holidays, gift giving, arrival of guests, or going to see the relatives. An example of a social story is offered on the opposite page.

Rehearsing the activities, like greeting people or opening gifts may help an individual with an ASD get accustomed to the new routine.

It is also helpful to prepare a photo album of new people, like distant relatives, who the individual might meet this time. It will allow him or her get comfortable with the new faces beforehand.

### **Step 2: Create a routine**

Individuals with an ASD need structure to thrive, so knowing what is going to happen is a soothing experience for many individuals with an ASD.

It would certainly be nice if you could keep the daily activities of an individual with an ASD as close to normal as possible, like standard waking and bed times, eating at regular meal times, etc. However, if you have to make changes to this, try to warn the individual beforehand by using visual supports,

like schedules and first-then boards. If you are going to travel, prepare some familiar food and items, like toys, that you can take with you.

### **Step 3: Consider the sensory input**

The sensory input from lights, noise, colors, and crowds of people heightens during the holidays, so try to be attentive to the sensory needs of an individual with an ASD. If he or she seems to be overwhelmed, allow a break in a quiet place. You can even help create a safe place, where he or she won't be bothered and can calm down. A safe place can be a room or even a part of a room, where the boundaries were marked by a masking tape. Make sure that the individual has a positive attitude towards the space and that he or she can go there at any time.

### **Step 4: Educate others**

Some adults and/or children might not be familiar with characteristics of autism spectrum disorder. Educating them beforehand about it, as well as helpful strategies that would reduce anxiety on their part and will help an individual to be more comfortable in a new environment.

