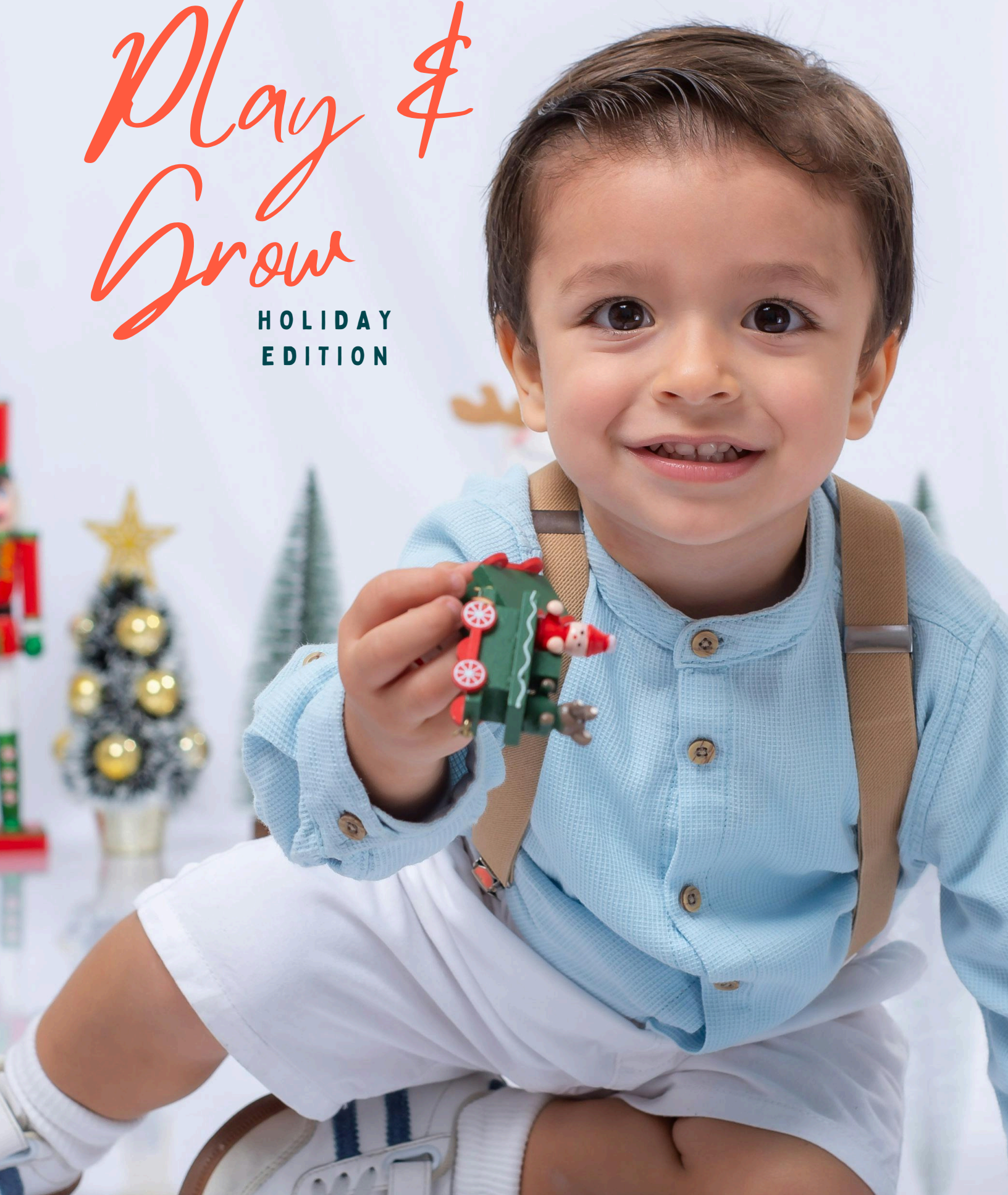


Play & Grow

HOLIDAY
EDITION





HOLIDAYS AREN'T ABOUT DOING THINGS PERFECTLY— THEY'RE ABOUT CREATING MOMENTS OF JOY, COMFORT, AND CONNECTION IN WAYS THAT WORK FOR YOUR CHILD.

Welcome to the "Growing Together" Collection! We have curated this collection of play-based activities and resources designed to help kids develop — all while having fun! While supplies last, we also include a small toy at our monthly events tied to each developmental area. Please supervise your children closely while they are playing with toys to ensure there are no choking hazards.

This resource is also mindful of children with different developmental needs, such as Autism. The activities are designed to be inclusive, offering various ways to engage and support every child's unique emotional development journey. The age range is 0-5 years, who are chronologically older but developmentally at this age.

Each series will focus on a type of child development:

- sensory
- gross motor
- fine motor
- cognitive development
- language development
- social-emotional

If you have any questions, the Autism Society Inland Empire is here to help. We have Resource Specialists who can be reached by email at info@ieautism.org or by calling us at 951.220.6922.

We want to thank the Children's Network and First Five San Bernardino for their generous financial support, which made this project possible.

We hope it brings joy, growth, and understanding to your family, helping your child thrive.

How the Holidays Can Impact a Child with Autism

Holidays can be especially challenging for young children with Autism because they often involve changes in routine, unfamiliar environments, and heightened sensory input. Loud music, bright lights, crowded gatherings, and new foods can be overwhelming and lead to sensory overload. Social expectations—such as greeting relatives, sitting still during meals, or participating in traditions—can also be stressful for children who thrive on predictability and structure. Even joyful events can feel confusing or overstimulating.

This guide was designed to support families with young autistic children by offering flexibility, preparation, and understanding—key ingredients for a more peaceful and inclusive holiday experience. WE hope you find it helpful.

Thank you to Kelly Birmingham, BCBA, for her valuable input in creating this resource.



1. DETERMINE WHAT YOUR FOCUS IS



What's Your Holiday Focus?

Every family's holiday season looks different—and that's okay. Whether your goal is rest, maintaining your child's current skills, or introducing a new one, the most important thing is to follow your child's lead. Young children with Autism often thrive with predictability, so keeping things simple and intentional can make the season more enjoyable for everyone.

Celebrate in Your Own Way

Traditional holiday activities may not always work for your child—and that's perfectly fine. You can modify traditions or create new ones that feel safe, joyful, and meaningful for your family. Whether it's skipping a large gathering, opening gifts slowly over several days, or celebrating with sensory-friendly decorations, what matters most is connection, not perfection.

Here are a few ideas to help make the season more comfortable and enjoyable:

- Sensitive Santa, Santa at the Mall or no visit with Santa
- Try to eat the meal served at the family gathering or take your own
- Open all the presents at once or take a few days to open them



2. USE VISUAL SUPPORTS FOR NEW ROUTINES

Young children with Autism often feel more secure when they know what to expect. Using visual schedules can help them understand the flow of the day—whether it’s visiting Grandma, opening gifts, attending a holiday event, practicing how to light the menorah, or trying traditional foods.

Your child’s ABA therapist or teacher may be able to help you create these supports.

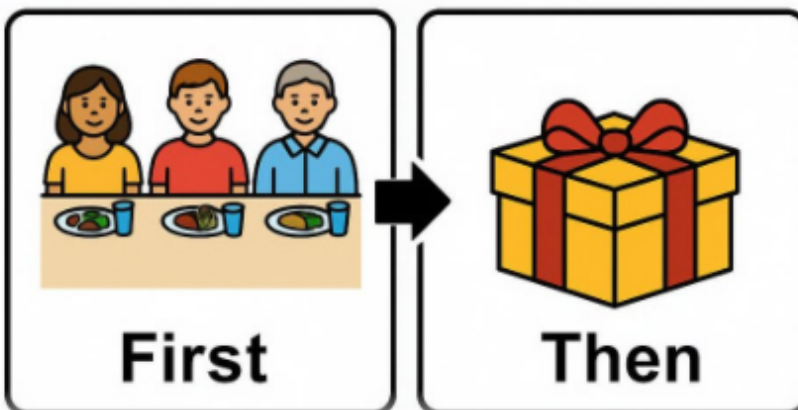
“First-Then” is a simple visual strategy used to help children with Autism understand and follow routines or transitions. It shows two steps: First (a required or less preferred activity), and Then (a preferred or motivating activity).

For example:

First: clean up the blocks

Then: watch a cartoon

This approach works well because many children with Autism benefit from clear, predictable structure. It reduces anxiety by showing what’s expected and what’s coming next. It also supports communication, especially for children who are non-speaking or have limited verbal skills. By using pictures or simple words, “First-Then” helps children process information visually and stay engaged.



First-Then visual support:
First: Eat dinner with family
Then: Open presents

SOCIAL STORIES

A social story is another type of visual support. It is a short, personalized narrative designed to help children with Autism understand and prepare for social situations, routines, or events. It uses simple language and often includes pictures to describe what will happen, what the child might see or do, and how they can respond.

Social stories are another effective tool for explaining traditions, such as Santa visits, gift exchanges, or lighting candles, in a way that feels safe and predictable. These supports can help reduce anxiety and enable your child to participate more comfortably in holiday activities.

Where to Find Free Social Stories

- .Christmas - andnextcomesl.com/2019/11/christmas-social-stories.html
- Christmas - theautismhelper.com/holiday-social-stories-visual-questions/
- Hanukkah - <https://educator.jewishedproject.org/media/5812>
- Use AI to create your own personalized story!





My Visit with Santa

Sometimes during the holidays, I might go to see someone special—Santa Claus!

Santa wears a red suit, has a white beard, and smiles a lot. He might be sitting in a big chair with decorations around him. There could be music, lights, and other people nearby.

Before I go, my grown-up will tell me what to expect. We might look at pictures or talk about what will happen. This helps me feel ready.

When I get there, I might wait in line. Waiting can be hard, but I can bring a toy, wear headphones, or hold my grown-up's hand to help me feel calm.

When it's my turn, I can choose what I want to do. I can wave to Santa, say hello, or just look. I don't have to sit on Santa's lap if I don't want to. I can stand next to him or stay with my grown-up.

Santa might ask me what I want for the holidays. I can answer, or my grown-up can help me. If I don't want to talk, that's okay too.

After my visit, I might get a picture or a small treat. Then I can go home and do something quiet or fun.

Visiting Santa can be exciting, and it's okay to feel happy, nervous, or unsure. My grown-up is there to help me, and I can do what feels best for me.

3. KEEP BEDTIME ROUTINES CONSISTENT

Young children with Autism often feel safest when their daily routines stay the same. During the holidays, try to maintain regular sleep, meal, and activity schedules as much as possible. If changes are unavoidable—like traveling or attending events—prepare your child ahead of time using gentle reminders, visual schedules, or social stories. Predictability helps reduce anxiety and supports smoother transitions during this busy season.



4. OFFER FOOD FLEXIBILITY

Holiday meals can be stressful, especially if your child has sensory sensitivities or food aversions. Offer familiar foods alongside festive dishes and don't worry if your child doesn't eat what's on the holiday menu. Comfort and nutrition matter more than tradition. Mealtime should be a moment of peace, not pressure.



5. BE MINDFUL ABOUT DECORATING

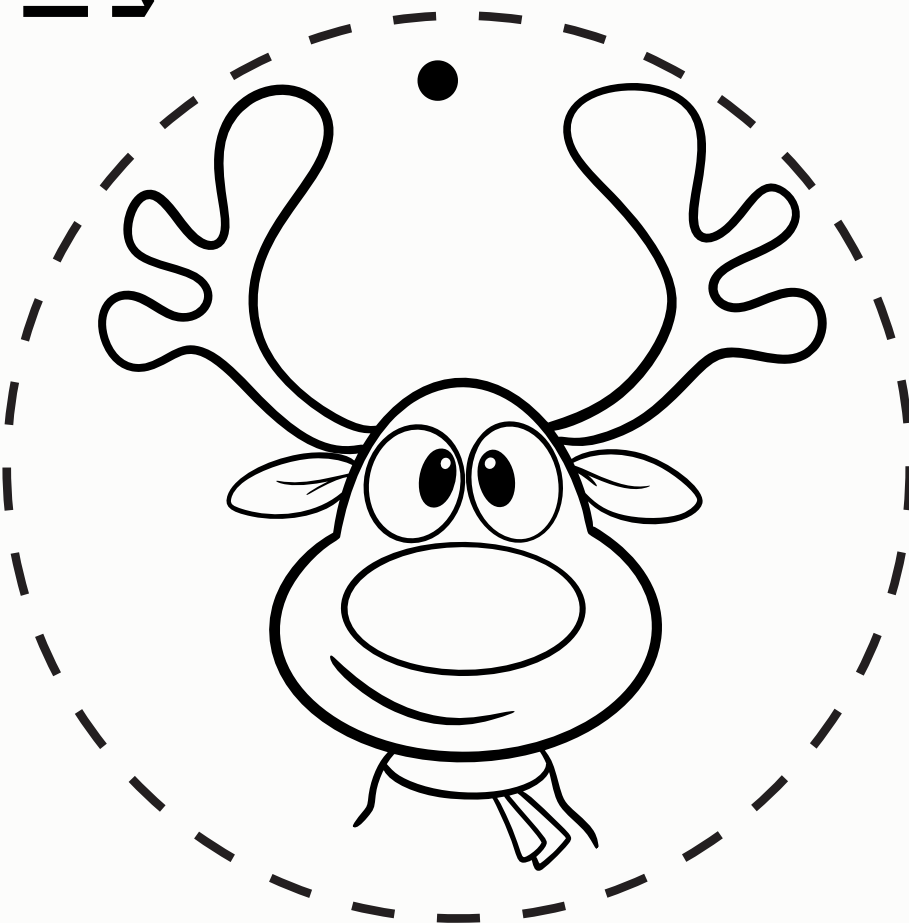
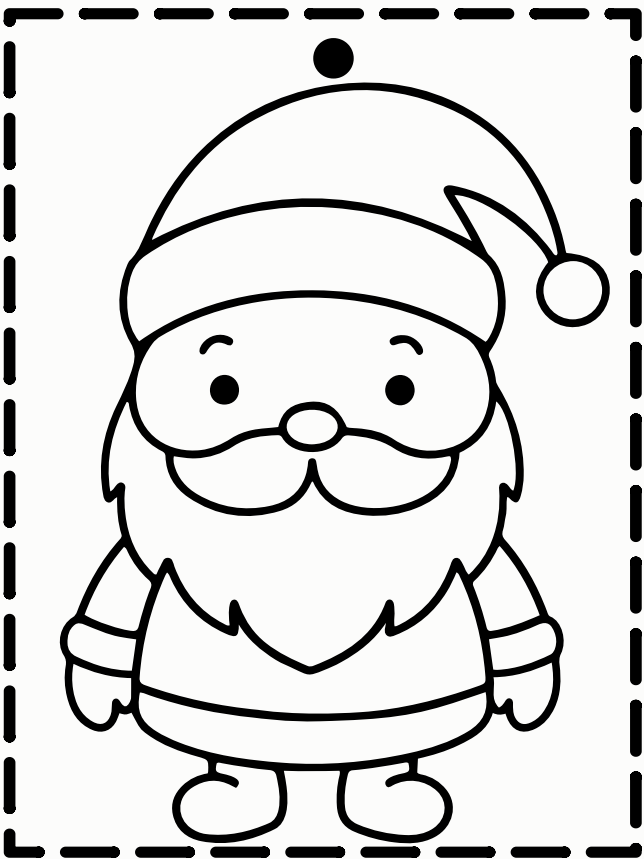
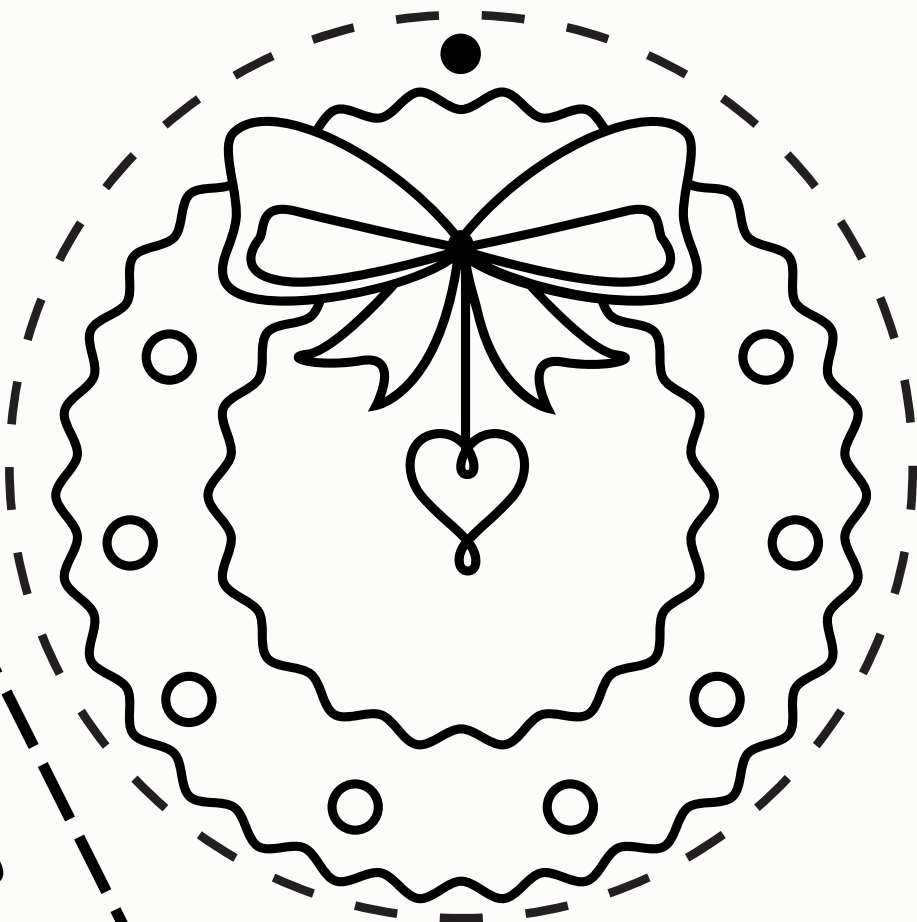
You don't necessarily have to simplify Christmas or holiday decorations, but doing so can make the holidays more comfortable and enjoyable for a young child with Autism. Many children on the spectrum experience sensory sensitivities, and the bright lights, loud sounds, and busy visuals that often come with the holiday décor can be overwhelming. Simplifying decorations—such as using soft lighting, limiting flashing or noisy items, and choosing calming colors—can help create a more peaceful environment.



It's also helpful to decorate gradually and involve your child in the process. Let them explore decorations at their own pace and choose items they feel comfortable with. This can help them feel more in control and reduce anxiety. If your child has a favorite character, color, or texture, incorporating those elements can make the space feel more familiar and safe.

Ultimately, the goal is to create a holiday atmosphere that feels joyful and secure for your child. Every family is different, and there's no one "right" way to decorate. Trust your instincts, observe your child's reactions, and adjust as needed to support their comfort and happiness during the season.

MAKE YOUR OWN
ORNAMENTS



6. PREPARE FOR SOCIAL EVENTS

Holiday gatherings can be overwhelming for young children with Autism, but thoughtful preparation can make a big difference.

- Set expectations ahead of time: Decide what's most important for your child—how long they'll interact with family, whether they'll sit at the table, how long they'll stay, and how much time they can spend on electronics. Share these expectations with your child and your guests to create a more supportive environment.
- Practice holiday scenarios: Role-play activities like opening presents, greeting relatives, or sitting at the table. This helps your child feel more confident and ready for the day.
- Consider sensory needs: Choose clothing that's comfortable for your child—dressing up isn't always necessary. Bring sensory tools or comfort items to help regulate emotions.
- Know your child's limits: Have an exit plan in case things become too overwhelming. It's okay to leave early or take breaks.
- Stay flexible: Unexpected changes can happen. Your calm and adaptable approach will help your child feel safe and supported.





7. PREPARE FOR TRAVEL

For parents of children with Autism, holiday travel—whether by car or air—can be both exciting and challenging. To make the experience smoother:

- Please prepare ahead of time: You can use visual schedules, social stories, or videos to explain where you're going and what to expect.
- Maintain routines: Try to keep meals, sleep, and activity times as consistent as possible.
- Pack a “busy bag”: Include favorite toys, snacks, sensory tools, and comfort items to help your child feel secure.
- Support sensory needs: Noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, or weighted items can help manage sensory sensitivities.
- Communicate with providers: Let airlines, hotels, or other services know about any accommodations your child may need.
- Allow extra time: Build in breaks and buffer time for transitions to reduce stress.
- Stay flexible and patient: Your calm and reassuring presence can make all the difference.



8. CREATE A CALM SPACE AT HOME OR AWAY

Holiday gatherings can be loud, busy, and overwhelming for young children with Autism. Creating a quiet, safe space — either at home or at the event — can help your child regulate and feel secure.

Fill this space with familiar comfort items, such as a favorite toy, blanket, fidget, or noise-canceling headphones. Please let your child know they're free to go there anytime they need a break. Supporting sensory needs helps make the holidays more peaceful and enjoyable for everyone.



9. AND, DON'T FORGET... TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF



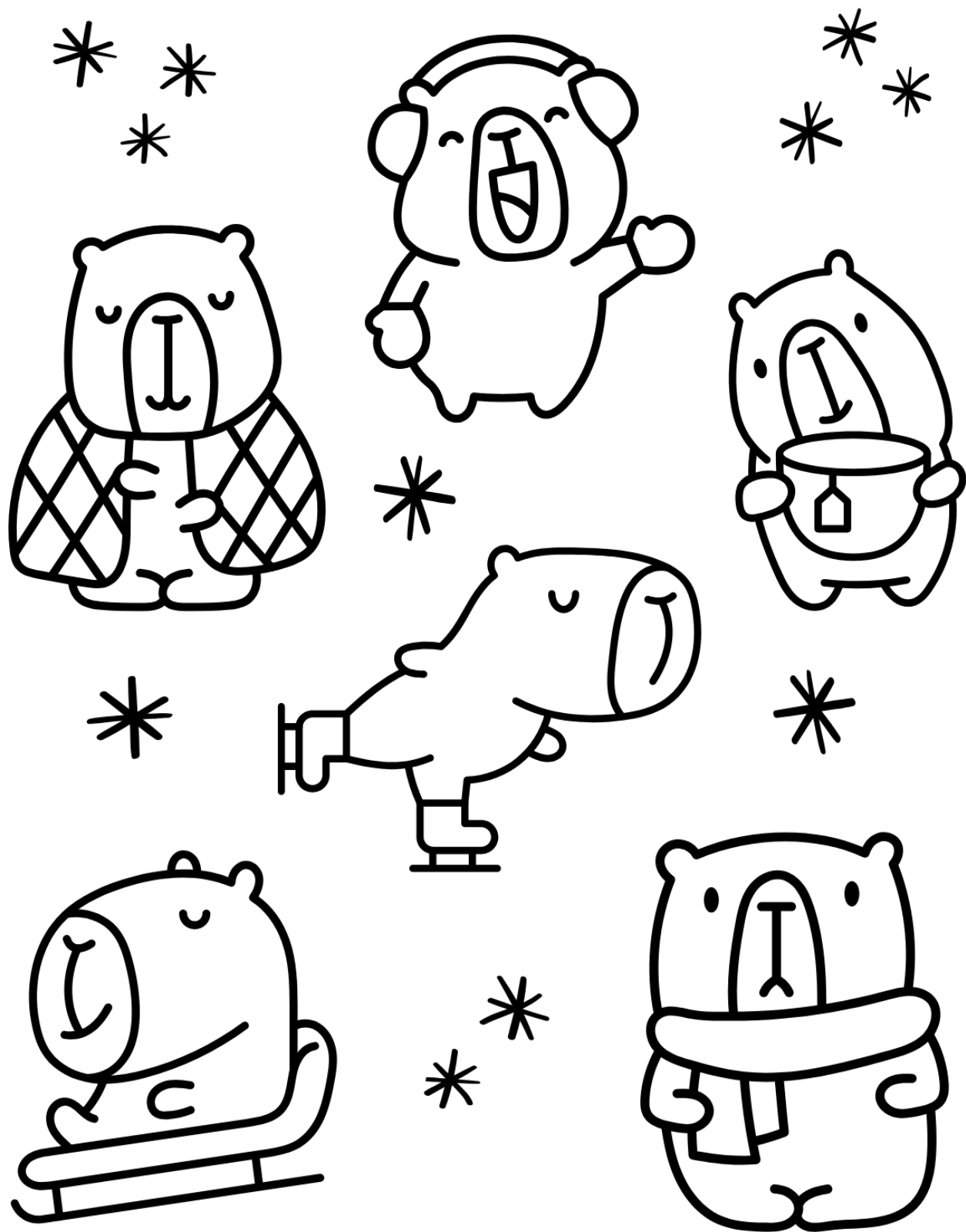
Holidays can be emotionally and physically demanding. Make time for self-care. Connect with other families through support groups or virtual meetups for encouragement.

As a parent of a young child with Autism, your days are often filled with care, advocacy, and love. But your well-being matters just as much. Taking time to rest, recharge, and connect with others allows you to show up as your best self—for both your child and yourself.

The Autism Society Inland Empire is here for you. We offer events, resources, and a welcoming community—including holiday gatherings with Sensitive Santas designed for the whole family.

Whether you're looking for guidance, connection, or just a moment to breathe, we're here for you. You're not alone—and you deserve support, too.

Have a Happy New Year!





Your local Autism connection

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