

TIPS FOR HOLIDAYS/FAMILY GATHERINGS

The holidays can be a stressful time for anyone, but particularly stressful for a child with social anxiety or Selective Mutism. The unpredictability, new people and change in routine can sometimes be too much!

Here are some ideas that might make things go more smoothly for your holiday or family gatherings:

Prepare and over-prepare your child.

Show photographs of family/friends you might be seeing. Try making a “memory” or “matching game,” with duplicates and colour copies of photographs of each person, - you could laminate them if you have facilities – and create a memory matching game. What a fun way to get to know family members you don’t see regularly but will be seeing! This might help ease some of the stress of meeting new people. You can even take them the photos along. It would make a great “nonverbal” interaction with someone at your gathering!

Find out where you’re going for the gathering. If it is close by, try to go to that person’s house a few days before the event so your child can “check it out” and at least be familiar with the setting.

Talk about where you’ll be going. Even “study” that area. If you’re travelling away from home, show your child where you are going on the map. Help him find some interesting facts on the area you’ll be visiting. Sometimes taking the focus off the trip details and making it fun and an “adventure” can decrease anxiety.

For children who get stressed by change in routine as much as new people and places, draw stick figure cartoons covering each day of the holidays and go over the pictures several times explaining what will happen (when/where/how long etc.) like an exciting story that’s about to unfold. This ensures that children aren’t overwhelmed by words, and gives them the security of something visual to refer back to as often as they like.

Prepare friends and family members.

It is important to tell others how to relate to your child. Usually when this is explained and people understand that your child has a form of social anxiety, people are more willing to accommodate your child. SMIRA’s leaflet ‘What Selective Mutism Means’ can be useful in these circumstances and is available to print off from the website. Business-sized cards containing information are available to purchase – please ask for information.

Let your child be your gauge.

Allow time for warm-up. Sometimes this takes a lot longer for SM children than others. It may even be 45 minutes to an hour. Be patient and if you have to sit in the room with the other children to help him or her get used to things, usually that pays off and he or she becomes comfortable more quickly. Don’t do everything for them or always talk for them, but having a “safe haven” can be comforting for them and helps them progress more quickly. Or it may not! If your child is obviously uncomfortable, find a quiet spot where he or she can do something calming. If that outgoing relative keeps coming up for kisses and hugs, take charge and speak up for your child! It doesn’t have to be made into a big deal, but if your child is struggling, it will probably affect the whole situation and make the event less pleasurable, and of course, make things more stressful on you!

Don't be afraid to speak up for your child. You don't need to say "He's shy" but maybe "He's not in the mood for hugs right now" or "She's had all the kisses she needs today!" It's okay to use humour or be silly, but no need to negatively reinforce something that isn't your child's fault! It also might help to let your child bring something familiar like a toy, book or game to have a "little piece of home" away from home.

Be realistic.

Be realistic in your scheduling around the holidays. Children with Selective Mutism also often have sensory issues and get overwhelmed easily. Add a new setting, different schedule, new people and foods, and you've got the formula for a guaranteed meltdown! Be wary of trying to fit too much into the day and try to maintain routine as much as possible. You might run into friends and family who just "don't get it." Sometimes it is necessary to limit time spent around those people until you are further along in your child's treatment or until they are more willing to understand what you and your child are going through. It's also okay to say "no." If things get overwhelming, cut back on commitments or create new traditions that maintain the peace for all involved.

Take care of "you."

Make sure you include time for yourself. Being the carer to a child with additional needs is stressful year-round. The ups and downs associated with SM can be enough to put you over the edge! Find something you enjoy doing and try to fit in it each day or at least every other day. Also try to include family time or down time for you and your children. This is valuable time to just have fun and, if you're lucky, sometimes that is when they open up!

The holidays can be a stressful time. When raising a child with Selective Mutism, sometimes you have to be the one to "take charge" and set limits in order for the holidays to be enjoyable for you and your family.

Adapted for the UK from an article written by Gretchen Aerni for SMG-CAN Quarterly Newsletter, November 2006