

# MAKING CONNECTIONS



Lauren H. Kerstein LCSW, P.C. 303.284.3603 [www.LaurenKerstein.com](http://www.LaurenKerstein.com) Holidays 2010



## Holiday Survival Guide (For You and Your Child)

By Lauren H. Kerstein, LCSW

The holidays are supposed to be a time of calm and rest. For many families, however, they are a time of stress, worry and turbulence. Many children experience extreme anxiety during the holidays. This anxiety can be particularly acute for children on the autism spectrum.

This anxiety can be triggered by:

- Changes in routines
- The anticipation of gifts
- The worry over not receiving desired gifts
- Caregivers being more distracted
- Extended family arriving in town
- Extra sensory input
- Increased social demands
- The chaos of the holidays
- New foods

The following tips may be of help during this holiday season:

- Create a Social Story™ (Gray, 2003) with your child. Social Stories™ are an effective way to make life events more predictable. You can even create multiple Social Stories™ to address the above-listed triggers. It is important to include pictures with words, design the story in a way that matches the developmental level of your child. Social stories should highlight the challenge or concern and offer strategies for managing these challenges. It is also critical to read the story many times.
- Write a schedule (include pictures) to show your child how you believe the day will go. Prepare your child that the schedule may change. You



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practice moving the pictures and/or words around to help your child. This will help your child with flexibility.

- Provide opportunities for quiet time away from the chaos.
- Increase sensory strategies before and during the holidays.
- Pre-discuss strategies that might help. Write out some cue cards that you can use if you notice your child is becoming increasingly distressed.
- Try to keep as many pieces of the standard routine in place.
- Reassure your child.
- Acknowledge feelings and help your child understand how he/she feels.
- This may seem in contradiction to the other recommendations, but it can be helpful to minimize discussion about the event. The bigger the anticipation becomes, the more stress you can create. It is possible to prepare, plan, and design

## Holiday Survival Guide (For You and Your Child)

*Continued from page 1*

social stories and strategies without sparking greater anticipation. It may be helpful to discuss this with other members of your family. Perhaps, discussion about the actual day can be kept to a minimum.

- It can be helpful to role play and rehearse strategies. You can help your child practice putting strategies into action.
- It may be helpful to keep changes to things in your house to a minimum. If that is not possible because you decorate the house or have to rearrange furniture for guests, try to keep these changes to a minimum and prepare your child before you make the changes.
- In order to minimize the anticipation, you can keep the gifts hidden until you are ready to open them.
- Have your child create a list (or help them create one) so that you know exactly what he/she is expecting. You can then talk about (with visual supports) the fact that he/she probably won't get everything on the list.
- Many parents report they feel judged by the family who arrives in town. Family members can often interfere and increase the challenges. Perhaps you can send an email or have a phone conversation about the typical challenges your child might face during the holidays. You can let your family know that you have strategies in place and would appreciate them letting you handle the situations that may arise. You might also provide a few tips for them—ways they can assist with making the holiday successful.
- Do a check ahead of time. If you are visiting someone's home, find out if they will be lighting scented candles; inquire as to what the menu might be; ask if there is a quiet spot to which your child might be able to escape; find out how many people will be attending, etc. It is often difficult to ask these questions



and many families do not want to impose. Knowledge, as we know, is power. The more you know, the more you can prepare your child. The more preparation you have, the more you can increase your child's ability to be flexible in this new environment.

- Have your child help you pack a "survival kit". This kit might include sensory strategies such as gum; chewy items; favorite toys and activities; foods that are higher preference; and some strategy cards.
- Create a Power Card (Gagnon, 2001). Power Cards are a visual tool to support appropriate behavior. There is a sample Power Card on page 3.
- If possible, take some time for yourself so that you have extra fuel to assist your child without feeling completely overwhelmed. The Autism Society of Colorado may be able to help with respite.

In this time of excitement, frenzy and exhaustion, the thought of creating and implementing strategies can be overwhelming. Investing now in preparing for the holidays will be well worth it. Preparation and strategies now can make for a more peaceful holiday season later.

Gray, C. (1993). *The original social story™ book*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

Gagnon, E. (2001). *Power cards: Using special interests to motivate children and youth with Asperger's syndrome and autism*. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Every piece of the universe, even the tiniest little snow crystal, matters somehow. I have a place in the pattern, and so do you...Thinking of you this holiday season!

-- T.A. Barron

## How to Survive the Holidays After a Divorce:

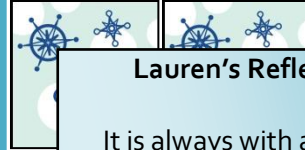
### Tips for Parents

Jenna Smith, MSW

For many of us, the holidays are a time of joy, celebration and being together with family. What if you are divorced? What does this mean if you have children? This can be extremely stressful and especially tough during this time of year. When a lot of people are looking forward to the holidays, divorced parents might feel fear, loneliness, anxiety, and even dread. While there is no “miracle cure” on how to get through the holidays, there are a few things you can do to make coping a little easier.

- 1) **Embrace new traditions**-Things are new this holiday season and that is okay. While keeping some old traditions, also be open to making new ones as well (consider a different day, time, place, go ice skating or caroling, invite different people over, etc.)
- 2) **Plan ahead**-Plan to do something, fun, relaxing, and as stress free as possible. If the actual holiday is too painful, consider taking a vacation to “escape” for awhile.
- 3) **Be Realistic**-Give yourself a break. No holiday is picture perfect. This year will look different and feel different. Make sure to have realistic expectations of what this year is going to look like.
- 4) **Take one day at a time; one holiday at a time.** The first year can be hard-but each year it will get a little easier.
- 5) **Continue doing activities you love (even if they look different)**-If you love watching football and wearing jeans on Thanksgiving, then you should do so. Continue doing things that you enjoy and love.
- 6) **Take care of yourself**-Self care is crucial during this time of year. Make sure to get proper sleep and exercise. Eat healthy foods. The healthier you eat the better you will feel. Avoid too much alcohol, sugar or caffeine. Budget time for yourself.
- 7) **Communicate with your children**-It is important that your child know where they will be spending the holiday. Put it in your calendar so that they know the schedule. If your child will be with the other parent, reassure them that you are happy they will be having fun, that you will miss them, and encourage them to have a good time.
- 8) **Reach out to loved ones**-Surround yourself with people who love you and support you. Being around others who care and understand what you are going through will make getting through the holidays a little easier.
- 9) **Breathe**-Remember to breathe. Take a couple deep breaths-or 10 if you need it. Do something that relaxes you.
- 10) **Stay positive**-Try and think positively. Remember and focus on the things that you enjoy about the holidays.

*Jenna K. Smith, MSW-Jenna K. Smith is a Social Worker who specializes in working with children and families. After receiving a Bachelors of Arts in Psychology at Scripps College in Claremont, California, Jenna attended the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver where she received a Masters in Social Work. Jenna has been a School Social Worker for the past 7 years. She also has a private practice. In her private practice, Jenna offers individual and group therapy. She specializes in working with elementary-age children dealing with: divorce, anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. Jenna utilizes a strengths-based approach with her clients. Jenna can be reached at 303.810.0658.*



### Lauren's Reflections

It is always with a touch of excitement and a dash of trepidation that I journey toward the New Year. How is it possible that the days are so long and the years speed by so fast? I have families who began with me when their children stood comfortably next to my hip. Those same children now proudly tower over me.

Time is a wonder. Time brings growth and change; heartbreak and sorrow; joy and happiness. Each day brings new challenges, new opportunities to feel successful, frantic, overwhelmed, utterly drained, and filled with love. This road of life is an interesting journey indeed. We simply forge ahead trying to get the proverbial pinnacle.

So, as we look forward to The New Year—I thank you for giving me the opportunity to make some of this journey by your side. I feel honored and blessed to have the privilege of spending time with so many incredible people.

In 2011, I wish for you more days filled with peace than turbulence, hope than sorrow and love than malice. May you have the opportunity to witness growth in ways you never thought possible; unabashed pleasure and the enjoyment you can only share with the ones you love.

Happy Holidays!  
Happy New Year!

Lauren

### **Putting the “Happy” in “Happy Holidays”: Strategies for Making the Holiday Season Manageable for Children with ASD and Their Families**

Melyssa Mayer, LSW

Christmas music playing on the radio, decorations beginning to go up in store, the smell of pumpkin permeating through restaurants, which can only mean one thing... the holiday season is approaching. This can be an extremely difficult time of year for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. This article will give you and your family some tools to help you navigate and strategize for changes at home and at school.

During the holiday season there are special activities, performances and art projects that occur at school. Along with these out of the ordinary activities there are many days off of school for the holidays. It might be helpful to present the holiday season in a visual manner by using a calendar. You can use a color system and mark the days that your child is in school days in one color and the days that are home days in another color. This promotes predictability for your child. When events are predictable, meltdowns are less frequent. If your child is going to be a part of a special performance at school, Social Stories™ by Carol Gray may be a helpful strategy. These stories can be written to describe what is expected of the student during the performance, who they will be standing next to, who will be in the audience and what to do if they need help. If possible, during the days at school with performances and extra activities that may cause sensory overload, extra breaks can be planned in order to help your child re-regulate his/her body. Be aware that your child may also need extra sensory input at school during the holidays due to the sounds, smells and textures used in the classroom and for art projects.

School during the holidays can be difficult, but from my experience, it is the time at home that is the most challenging for a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. It is important that as a family prepare appropriately for the days that your child is going to be spending at home. On your calendar you can write the activities that you are going to be doing each day. If you are going to have family in town that your child does not know well, it may be helpful to give your child pictures of these family members with their names in order to promote comfort in meeting “new” family members.

If your child has difficulty with wrapped presents because he or she does not understand what is inside, consider wrapping them in cellophane (this way he or she can unwrap the gift yet knows its contents). You can also draw the item on the gift tag. Try to avoid canceling regular activities in order to maintain as much of the normal household routine as possible.

Make a conscious effort to go to bed and get up at the same time each day as well. Maintain much needed consistency with medication and mealtimes.

Because of your child’s possible difficulties with recognizing and being sensitive to the feelings of others, provide opportunities for your child to open presents from other people in the presence of immediate family only. Model or pre-teach, depending on what your child is capable of, appropriate responses for receiving presents, especially the presents they do not like or were not expecting. For example “thank you,” “that was kind of you,” smiles directed to others, etc.

Hopefully some of these strategies will help you and your family have a successful, meaningful and relaxing holiday season.

*Happy Holidays!*

Melyssa Mayer, LSW



Try to avoid canceling regular activities in order to maintain as much of the normal household routine as possible.



**"Are We There Yet?" - Traveling Tips for Families**

By Mara Trager, MA, LPC

Falling leaves, snowy roads, and the occasional sixty-five degree day signals that winter in Colorado is approaching, as is the holiday season. For some this includes traveling in order to be with friends and loved ones. Whether by car, airplane, or foot, traveling as a family can bring some unique challenges. These include, but are certainly not limited to packing for the future, waiting in lines, staying together, and keeping entertained. As school breaks approach and family vacations solidify, some preparations for the travel times ahead can make for an enjoyable experience with positive memories for all. Here are a few tips to consider before heading out:

1. When packing, include some comforts from home; a blanket, photograph of a pet, or favorite toy and help a child feel connected to home while being in a new environment.
2. Pack travel-friendly snacks and water. Snack breaks are important to combat crankiness and to keep energy up, especially when in the car or plane for long stretches. Consider crunchy almonds or pretzels, chewy fruit leather or raisins. Nut butter packs travel well as do kid size protein bars. Refillable water bottles are good to tote around to encourage hydration.
3. Brush up on some travel games where no extra materials are needed; Play I Spy in which players must list everything seen that is red, for example. Look for different State license plates while driving. Start a "Guess Who" game where players ask questions that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no' in order to guess what particular initials stand for. (Ex: H.M. 'Is it a girl?' 'Is she a teenager?' 'Does she sing and act?')
4. Stick to a routine as much as possible. Picture schedules can help clarify routines (see right-side panel). Although celebrating and vacations are often a welcome change of scenery, guiding children as you would home will help expectations get met. Bedtime, waking time, and mealtime should remain consistent to support good behavior and fun for all!

**Going to the Airplane**

Get your suitcase



Put suitcase in car



Sit in the car



Drive to airport



Park car



Walk suitcase into the airport



Check suitcase



Wait in line to go through security



Wait for the airplane



Wait in line to board the airplane



Sit quietly in your assigned seat



Get out your toys for the long flight



## SIBLING STORIES

### A VIEW FROM THEIR EYES

#### FEELINGS

- *Ambivalence*  
“I love my sibling but I want him to be different.”
- *Love*  
“I do love my sibling.”
- *Embarrassment*  
“My sibling had to be dragged into school screaming the other day and all of my friends heard him. They knew he was my brother.”
- *Isolation*  
“My friends don’t understand what my life is like.”
- *Guilt*  
“I feel bad that I don’t always want to spend time with my sibling.”
- *Worry*  
“I worry that my sibling isn’t going to do well in his new school.”  
“I worry that I can catch autism.”
- *Jealousy*  
“My sibling gets more attention than me.”
- *Happy*  
“I had fun watching a movie with my sibling today.”

(Lauren H. Kerstein, LCSW, P.C., 2010)

#### “SIBLING SUPPER CLUBS”

This group will meet from 5:00-7:00 the third Thursday night of the month for dinner and dessert. The group members will have the opportunity to begin to create a group project recording, illustrating and discussing the ups and downs of having a sibling with unique needs. The group will also include games and an opportunity to have FUN!



## **MAKING CONNECTIONS - RELATIONSHIP SKILLS GROUPS**

“Making Connections” began in 1999 to create an opportunity for individuals struggling with relationship skills to come together to find friends. The groups are designed to work on the numerous skills involved in interacting with others, creating friendships and sustaining fulfilling satisfying relationships. Most importantly, “Making Connections” was designed to make interactions meaningful and fun! The groups incorporate the following skills into fun activities:

- Interaction and friendship skills
- Reading nonverbal cues
- Recognizing one’s areas of challenge
- Understanding one’s strengths and the ways in which to build upon those strengths
- Sensory awareness and strategies
- Cooperation
- Executive Function
- Big picture thinking vs focusing on the small details (Central Theory of Cohesion)
- Bullying
- Effective problem solving

For more information please visit our website at: [www.LaurenKerstein.com](http://www.LaurenKerstein.com)

## **COMING SUMMER 2011!**

### **From My World to the Real World Making Connections and Developing Strategies**

This program is designed to assist for adults aged 18-25 struggling with challenges that include but may not be limited to: relationship skills, sensory, emotional regulation, learning, focus, organization and pragmatic language. The group is designed for individuals who would benefit from a highly interactive setting (despite social challenges) and would be able to participate in conversations and activities. Intakes will be conducted prior to the beginning of the program to assess the strengths and needs of each prospective member.

The following topic areas will be explored in this intensive summer program.

- Talking the Talk; Walking the Walk—Exploring Interaction Skills
- Becoming Prepared for Independence- Hygiene and Adult Life Skills (money management, cooking, self-care, executive function)
- Finding the Reset Button—Learning Ways to Control My Body and Emotions
  - The Real World-- What Can I Expect? What do I Need to Know?

More information will be posted at: [www.LaurenKerstein.com](http://www.LaurenKerstein.com) in the New Year!

**Lauren H. Kerstein LCSW, P.C.**  
**"Making Connections"**

**Address:**

5347 S. Valentia Way, Suite 120  
 Greenwood Village, CO 80111

**Phone:**

303.284.3603

**E-Mail:**

[lauren@laurenkerstein.com](mailto:lauren@laurenkerstein.com)

**Resources:**

[www.AutismAspergerBooks.com](http://www.AutismAspergerBooks.com)

We help individuals develop strength-based, individualized approaches in order to more effectively manage life's challenges.



Please call today to receive more information regarding our specialized services including:

- Individual Therapy
- Family Therapy
- Dyads
- School Consultation
- Behavior Consultation
- Sibling Groups/Interventions
- Relationship Skills Groups
- Executive Function Support
- Home-Based Consultations
- Early Intervention
- Parent Support and Therapy
- Training/Presentations




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