

## 2021 Hopebridge Autism-Friendly Holiday Guide



The holiday season seems to start earlier and earlier every year, barely getting through Halloween before Christmas trees are on display. It's something many kids look forward to (and adults too!), but this time of year can also bring on stress. It's especially overwhelming for children on the autism spectrum, even if they love Christmas or Chanukkah.

You don't deserve to miss out on the joy due to some challenges, and neither does your child or other family members. Easing the pressure around this time of year might just mean emphasizing different parts of the holidays or celebrating in another way.

That's why we developed the 2021 Hopebridge Autism-Friendly Holiday Guide. We hope these resources help your family merrily navigate seasonal sensory struggles, visits with Santa, family gatherings, gift-giving and more.

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### Here's what you'll find inside:

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## HOW TO CELEBRATE A SENSORY-FRIENDLY HOLIDAY: 5 TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS

Does your child experience sensory overload or have a difficult time with a change in routine that makes the holidays tough? You're not alone. But just because your family is touched by autism spectrum disorder (ASD), it doesn't mean you have to skip out on the fun. Here are five common sensory struggles this time of year, plus BCBA-approved ideas for how to turn them around to add holiday cheer in your household.



***The Challenge:*** Meeting a stranger in a crowded mall with long lines and festive music – all while being told to stay still for a photo! – can be nerve-wracking for some children.

### Holiday Tip #1: Meeting Santa

- Check local events for judgment-free, sensory-friendly Santa experiences
- Use a social story to prepare
- Ease into it! It could be a quick meet-and-greet for their first time



***The Challenge:*** Twinkling holiday décor can cause sensory overload. A change in environment can also spark caution or meltdown.

### Holiday Tip #2: Festive Decor

- Allow your child to choose décor and set it up together
- Avoid flashing lights and sounds...
- ... unless your kiddo adores them!



***The Challenge:*** For those with autism, shopping outings can be tough any time of year. The holidays only escalate the stimuli.

### Holiday Tip #3: Shopping for Gifts

- Talk to your child about what to expect
- Prepare a visual schedule
- Decide in advance who gets gifts
- Avoid peak times
- Bring comfort items, like headphones
- If all else fails – shop online!





***The Challenge:*** Opening presents around others can be overstimulating for kids on the spectrum, especially if there are a lot of gifts or other kids involved.

### **Holiday Tip #4: Unwrapping Gifts**

- Share interests with gift-givers in advance
- Space out gifts, one at a time
- Let gift-givers know your child may not be able to verbally say “thank you”
- Open some privately



***The Challenge:*** Children with autism don’t always like the way winter clothing feels, and others may have temperature regulation issues or love snow so much they dart outside without a coat.

### **Holiday Tip #5: Cold Weather**

- Explain why coats are important
- Have your kiddo pick out their favorite winter clothes
- Offer motivators to wear them
- Lay out clothes the night before
- Use visual guides





## 5 WAYS TO SUPPORT THE AUTISM COMMUNITY DURING THE HOLIDAYS

What do the holidays mean for you? Maybe it's the sounds of Mariah Carey's Christmas album, the sights of perfectly wrapped presents under a dazzling tree, the feel of warm and cozy sweaters, or the scents of sugar cookies baking in the oven. For many, it's a room full of family celebrating together. If you have loved ones touched by autism spectrum disorder (ASD), however, the holidays might look – and feel – a little different.

### 1. Just ask!

Autism affects everyone differently, so ask how you can help. Engage your party guests to learn their likes and dislikes regarding food, gifts and the environment. For example, ask if there's a special item you can put on the menu, what type of gift is best, what their triggers might be, and what they enjoy about the holidays.

### 2. Discuss plans in advance.

If you are hosting, tell the individual or caregivers what to expect. For instance, share your party plans, décor ideas and a schedule of the day's events (e.g. Are you opening gifts before or after dinner?). When gift-giving, consider telling the caregiver what you have planned for a present and how it will be wrapped. This helps them prepare.

### 3. Limit stressors.

Sensory overload can cause difficulties for some individuals with autism, so it may be best to limit loud sounds, flashing holiday lights and other potentially stressful stimuli. For others, social anxiety may be a challenge, so pause on hugs and kisses unless you know they enjoy them. This can keep them comfortable and safe.

### 4. Create a safe space.

Offer a quiet, calm place where children or adults with autism can go if they feel overwhelmed. Equip the room with preferred items and other support tools, such as fidget toys, a weighted blanket or headphones. Make sure caregivers know about the space so they can teach their loved one where to go in case they need a break.

### 5. Model desired behaviors, but don't be a stickler on manners.

Phrases like "please" and "thank you" are appreciated, but we don't recommend making them mandatory. Understanding traditional etiquette around gifts and how to react in social scenarios can be difficult for those with autism, especially if they are non-speaking or learning to communicate in a new way. It is helpful to keep an open mind and loosen judgment in these instances.

Use this as a time to create fun, new traditions, like adding cereal to the Chanukkah spread or experiencing a smaller, more intimate worship service. The goal is not perfection, but rather to share the love with others in a meaningful way.



## GIFT IDEAS FOR KIDS WITH AUTISM AND SPECIAL NEEDS

It's the time of year for spreading holiday cheer, so our Hopebridge Heroes traded in their superhero capes for elf hats for a day to come up with 30 of the best toys for kids with autism on this 2021 gift guide.



### Gift Ideas for Active Play and Enhancing Gross Motor Skills

- [Ollyball](#)
- [Best Choice Products Kids Climb & Crawl Soft Foam Block Playset Structures](#)
- [Brainy Shark Pop Up Play Tent and Ball Pit](#)
- [The Floor is Lava Game](#)
- [Intex Playhouse Jump-O-Lene Inflatable Bouncer](#)
- [Little Tikes Easy Store 3-Ft. Trampoline](#)



### Toys for Building Fine Motor Skills

- [Pop-it Purse](#)
- [Carrot Harvest Planting Wooden Toy](#)
- [Green Toys Pretend Play Tool Set](#)
- [Buckle Toy Airplane](#)
- [Manhattan Toy Playful Pony Wooden Toddler Activity Center](#)
- [Melissa & Doug Magnetic Towing Game](#)



### Gift Ideas for Creativity

- [Flower Garden Building Toy](#)
- [Mad Mattr Super Pack](#)
- [Melissa & Doug Water Wow Activity Pad](#)
- [Hape Mighty Mini Band Wooden Percussion Instrument](#)
- [Infantino Press and Stay Sensory Blocks](#)
- [WikkiStix Basic Shapes](#)





## Toys for Communication and Imaginative Play

- [My First Game: Bears in Pairs](#)
- [Fisher-Price Laugh and Learn Servin' Up Fun Food Truck](#)
- [Green Toys Cupcake Play Set](#)
- [Story Magic Wooden Dress-Up Dolls](#)
- [First 100 Words Books](#)
- [Mr. Potato Head](#)

## Gift Ideas for Sensory Fun and Calming

- [Sensory TheraPlay Box](#)
- [Unicorn-Themed Chew Necklace](#)
- [Weighted Plush Throw Pillow](#)
- [Flip Sequin Stuffed Animal](#)
- [OUTREE Kids Pod Swing Seat](#)
- [Star Light Rotating Projector](#)



## WHAT TO EXPECT: “MY CHRISTMAS SOCIAL STORY”

### What Is a Social Story?

Social stories are tools that can be used to help individuals with autism learn what to expect and help prepare for certain social situations. This season leads to a lot of changes in routine and environment, so this holiday-themed social story is intended to help children prepare for some of the holiday “hoopla” leading up to the end of the year.

### How to Prepare the Social Story:

We encourage you to personalize this piece, so we intentionally left blank spaces for you to make it your own. Write in your own family’s traditions from your child’s perspective and use your child’s photo whenever possible. You can also remove pages that are not applicable. While this is geared toward Christmas, you can also use it as a template to swap out the holiday name and themes for the holiday your family celebrates. If editing digitally, add your photos and text with help from a PDF editor (there are a number of apps that can help with this!).

### How to Use Hopebridge’s Holiday Social Story:

This social story is easily downloadable and can be printed as a hard copy or digitally viewed on a tablet. Choose an appropriate time to introduce the story, ideally when your child seems open to learning. When you begin, read through the story several times and practice over multiple days. Discuss how it relates to your child’s real-life experiences. When it comes time to put these learnings into action, reinforce their expected behaviors with positive feedback.

Now let’s get to it ... head to the next page to begin the holiday social story:



# MY CHRISTMAS



# SOCIAL STORY

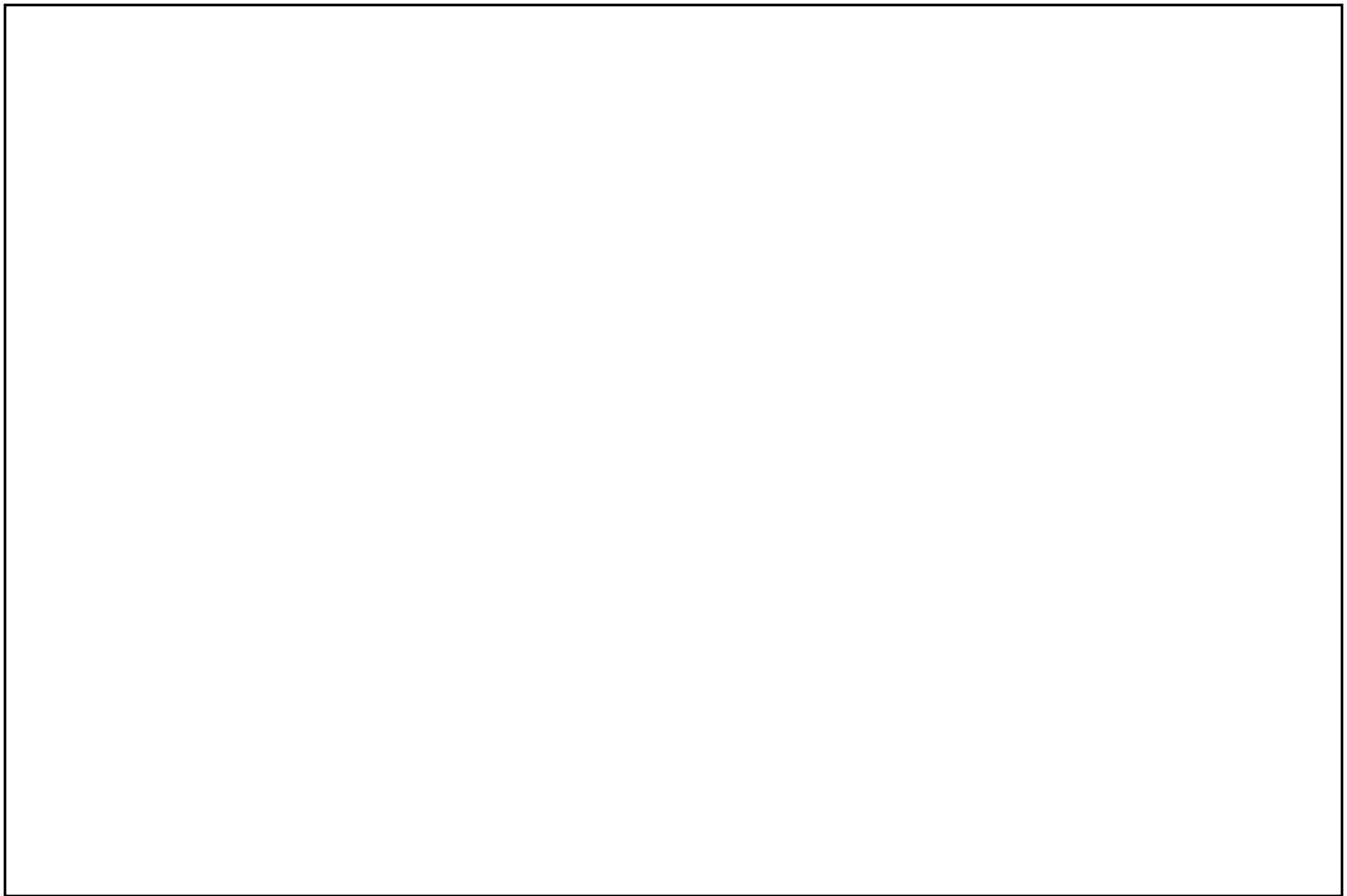




**It is almost Christmas.  
Christmas time can be exciting.  
It can also make me feel overwhelmed.**



**We see our family and friends  
during Christmas.  
When we see other people during Christmas,  
it is nice to say, "Merry Christmas!"**



(Add a photo of your family's home at Christmas time or of your holiday decorations)

**Some of the Christmas decorations  
we will have at our house this year are**

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**and**

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**People put wrapped presents  
under the Christmas trees in their homes  
to give to other people.  
It can be exciting to see presents under the tree  
that are for me or other people.**





**We will wait to open presents  
until my \_\_\_\_\_ says it is time.  
It can be hard to wait, but waiting  
makes Christmas more fun.  
If I start to feel frustrated I can ask to take  
a break in my room or a safe place.**



**After people go to sleep on Christmas Eve,  
Santa visits their houses to bring presents to kids.**



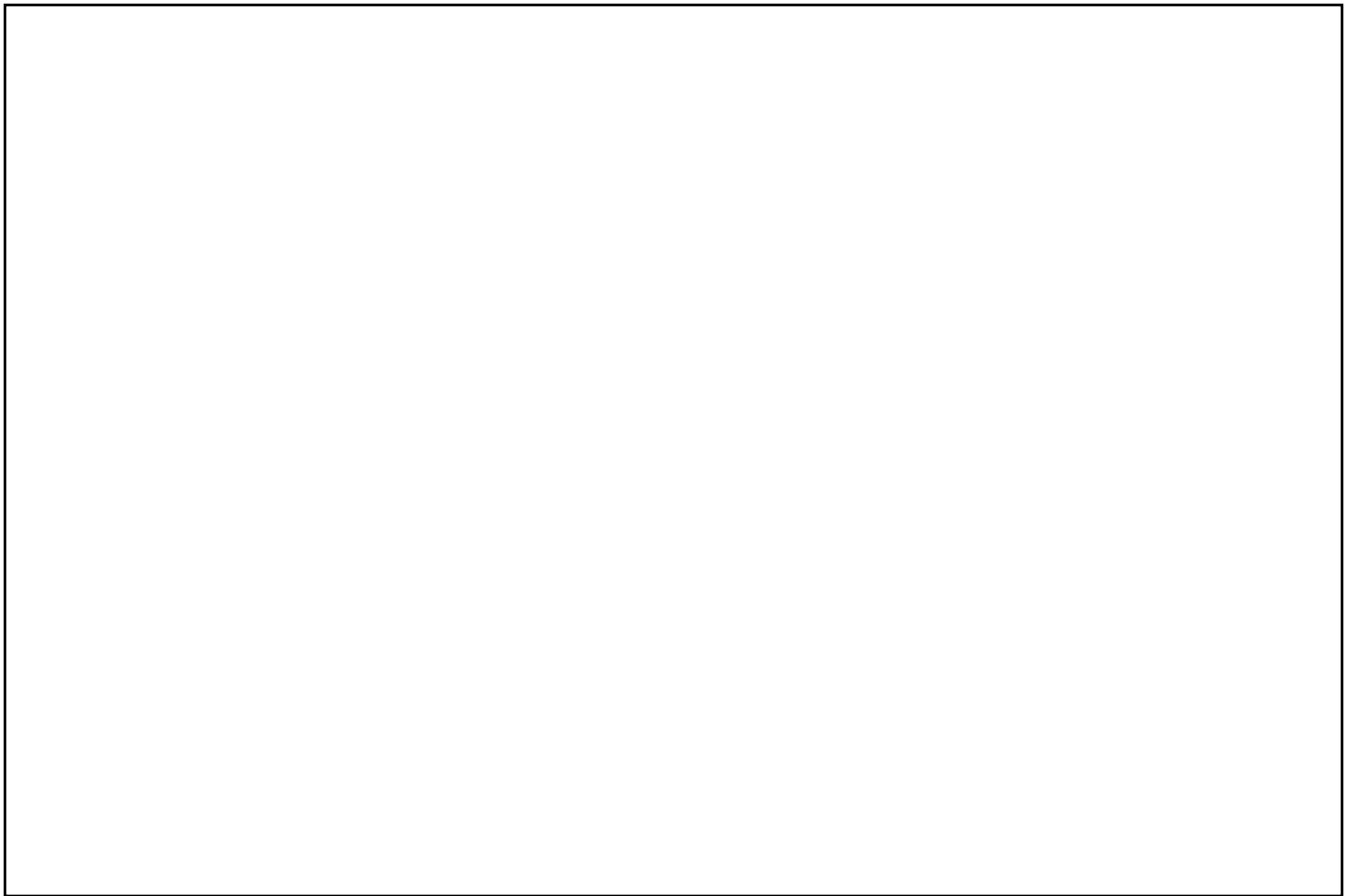
**Santa will visit our house, too.  
We will not see him while he is here, but he will  
leave presents for me to open Christmas morning.  
I can leave him milk and cookies before  
I go to bed as a thank-you for bringing presents.**





**After waking up on Christmas morning,  
many people open their presents  
from Santa and family.**





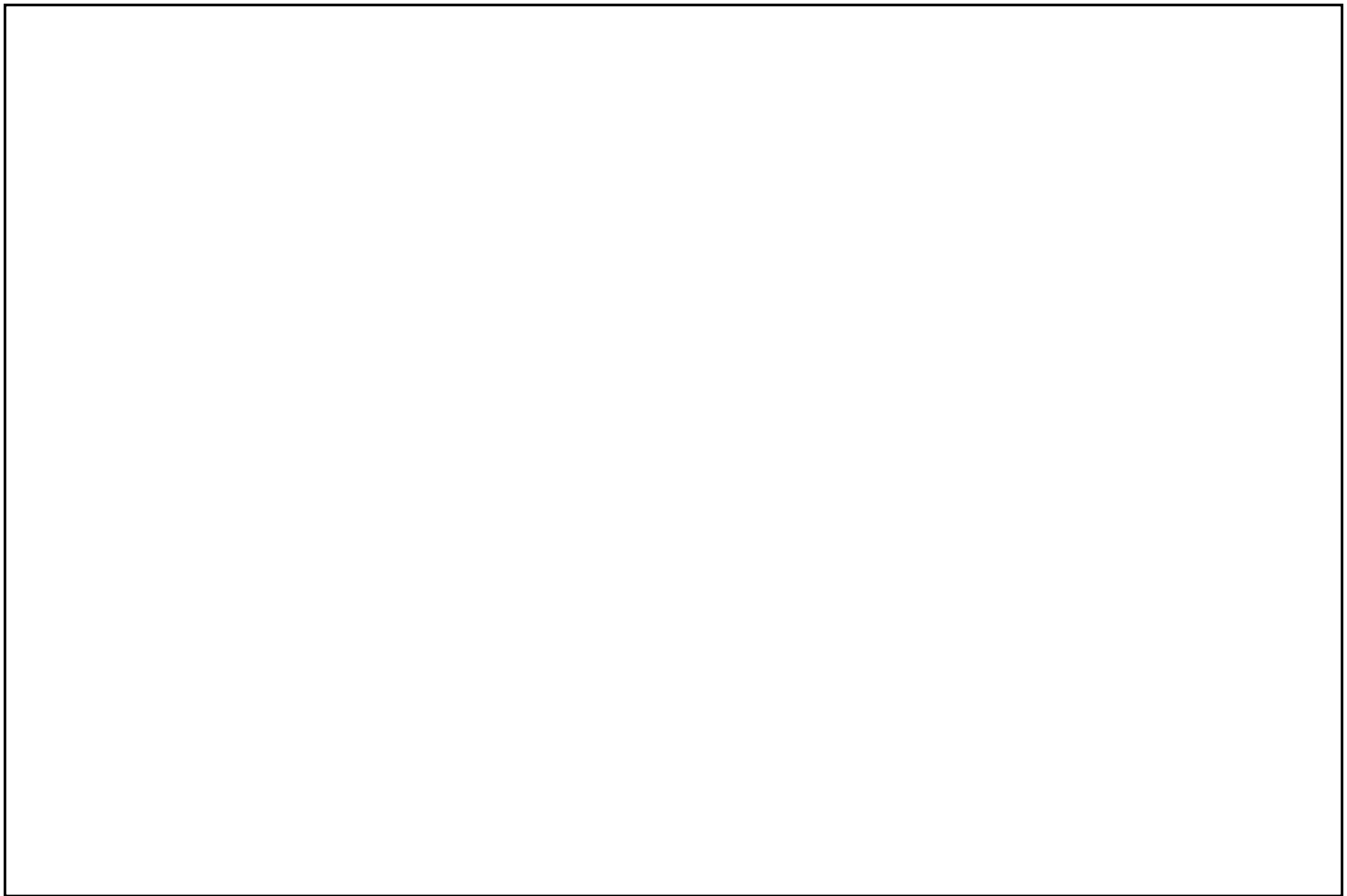
(Add a photo of how your family celebrates Christmas morning)

## On Christmas morning, my family will

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(Add a photo of your child)

**People who receive presents usually say “thank you” to the people who give them. To tell people I like my gifts, I can \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Christmas is going to be fun this year.**



## WHERE TO TURN FOR MORE PEDIATRIC AUTISM SUPPORT

If you are looking for more support around Christmas and in the new year, our Hopebridge Heroes are here for you.

For those currently receiving therapy at Hopebridge, ask your BCBA or speech therapist for help with more behavior strategies, [communication tools](#), or social stories around specific Christmas experiences, such as meeting Santa, visiting family or opening presents. Reach out to your [local center](#) to see what sensory-friendly events and activities are happening in your area.

If your child does not yet attend Hopebridge for therapy, we still want to help! Fill out the quick and easy form at [hopebridge.com/contact](https://hopebridge.com/contact) for a diagnostic assessment or [ABA therapy](#) evaluation to give your child the best gift possible this year: more independence and opportunities. Once you reach out, visit [hopebridge.com/blog](https://hopebridge.com/blog) for even more holiday tips and autism resources from our team of experts.

Until then ... Happy Holidays from Hopebridge!