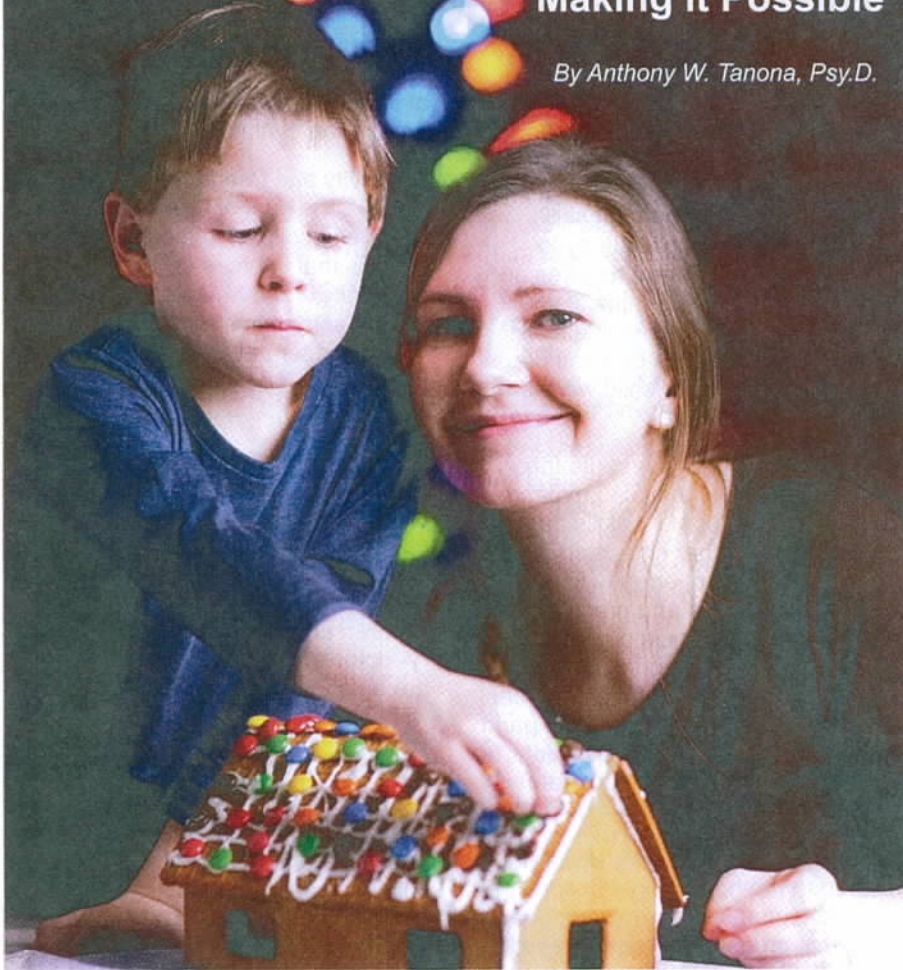


# ADHD, Autism & Holiday Cheer

## Making it Possible

By Anthony W. Tanona, Psy.D.



Here comes the holiday season! This is a time that is often filled with joy and jolly feelings, however, it can also cause great deals of stress, frustration, and exhaustion, especially if you have a child that has ADHD and/or autism. Excitement and over-stimulation can exacerbate symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity. In addition, children with ADHD and/or autism typically have difficulty with lots of free time, and boredom can lead to behavioral difficulties. Holiday breaks can create a change in routine, a potential decrease in structured activities, or elongated gatherings or meals where children are asked to remain still and quiet for long periods of time.

As was discussed in the August 2010 *Parent Notebook* article about School Routines, planning and organization are tools parents can use in a preventative manner to anticipate and address areas of difficulty. As parents, sitting down and designing a consistent holiday routine will allow the schedule to be well thought out prior to presenting it to your child. This can include structured activities, meals, rest times and bedtimes.

Establishing a consistent routine around your children can help them feel safe and secure. Within this routine, implementing some structured activities and some free play times can help promote consistency, creativity, and enjoyment.

### General Holiday Ideas:

- Exercise-based activities
- Holiday-themed Arts and Crafts
- Safe baking, cooking, and food preparation tasks
- Play dates and structured time with friends
- Family outings

As a parent, you may feel apprehensive about upcoming family gatherings based on your child's past behaviors and potential feelings of embarrassment. Children have an ability to pick up on insecurities and to test limits as far as possible, therefore, presenting rules and/or consequences with confidence can help with compliance. Continuing to utilize and implement your already established household rules will be important, even during times of high excitement. During planned visits, review your expectations of your child's behavior with him/her prior to your arrival. As a parent, coming up with a set plan and implementing it consistently will be important.

### Holiday Plan:

- **Reviewing the rules.** It will be important to focus on 3 or 4 main rules to make things concise and easy for your children to remember.
- **If your child is prescribed medication, continuing to administer it may help with their behaviors.** If you are considering a "medication holiday," consult with your physician to discuss the pros and cons of this choice.
- **Set up a behavioral modification program to reinforce your child's positive behaviors.** This can be established over the course of the vacation (for example allowing your 12 year old child to earn a reward such as a video game for going seven days without any aggression towards siblings) or in reference to a specific visit or day (for example rewarding your 6 year old child with a sticker for each half hour of listening and following directions). It will be important to review this with your child to allow them to work to achieve their goals.
- **A list of consequences that you will feel comfortable applying if your child misbehaves.** This is typi-

cally more difficult in public or when around others, therefore, planning how you will handle different behaviors in advance can be beneficial.

- **Implementing rules, reinforcers, and consequences consistently and reliably between all of your child's caregivers.**
- **Identifying activities that your child can engage in during downtime.** Based on your child's age, you may also want to consider bringing along activities for them to do during or after meals such as games, sticker books, drawing materials, etc.
- **Utilizing your child as a "helper" to assist with safe food preparation, setting the table, decorating, handing out presents, or cleaning up wrapping paper.**
- **If you are planning a long visit, allowing your child to "burn off some steam" may be important.** Pending the weather, playing outside can be a wonderful way to accomplish this prior to visits.
- **The holidays are often times for us to gather with loved ones and reflect upon what we are thankful for.** Prior to going to a gathering, have all of the parents/guardians help their children identify what they are thankful for. During your holiday celebration, set aside some time for all of those in attendance to share what they are thankful for.

**Coming up with a structured plan for the holidays will be important in order to help increase your family's ability to enjoy the time spent together. Remember the old saying: "Failure to plan is planning to fail!" It will be important to create an overall structure, or shell, of the holiday break, while also identifying specific strategies to utilize during gatherings or events. This can then help both you and your child have an enjoyable holiday season.**

## Happy Holidays!

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