

Growing Up with Sensory Issues

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Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas: A Sensory Triathlon



*F*all brings us cooler evenings, color-changing leaves, and, of course, the inevitable articles about how to help your child cope with the holidays despite their struggles with SPD. There are a lot of standard items in these articles that are extremely helpful, such as lists of items to keep on or about your person (such as acceptable snacks, earplugs, and tranquilizer darts for relatives who don't believe in SPD).

Those are great articles, but I want to tackle a few things that aren't so easy to check off the list. First, I want to deal with the big pre-planning concepts. This is not to imply that checklists and having a "go bag" ready are bad things, but in an emergency, you can usually find Pop-tarts and earplugs at any convenience store. What you can't get unless you plan ahead are things like deciding where your priorities lie, a united family front, and multiple lines of retreat.

Priorities. What's more important: a child who gets stuffed into a socially acceptable Halloween costume or letting the child get through Halloween happy? Is it all about continuing the family traditions, or is it more important to have a holiday where your children all feel safe? (Hint: If you insist on doing things "just

so," typical siblings may well pay the price when the little SPuDster loses it.)

You can, of course, easily guess where my priorities lie: in keeping both the people with SPD and those without both comfortable and relatively sane. And many people reading this have long since abandoned all hope of anything approaching normalcy and switched to being flexible and improvising like crazy. I salute you, and I applaud your extreme lack of normal!

Just as important as figuring out where your priorities lie (and being flexible as more data comes in) is doing your best to create a united front. A united front is what you create when you get as many adults on the same page as possible before the big event. This could mean Mom and Dad, or it could mean Dad and Grandma and Aunt Ella, or any combination of adults who are invested in the kids and "get" SPD.

Whoever the parenting team consists of, everyone on it should know the high sign that will be given when it is necessary to extract a child from an overwhelming situation and how that extraction will be attempted. That means that, when the kids go out in their costumes, a reliable member of the trick-or-treating team

knows to call Mom when things go south. No one can predict when you might hit three houses in a row with intense haunted-house decorations and volume 3 of "Spooky Songs for Terrifying Total Strangers" blasting onto the porch.

By the way, while I said, "Call MOM," it doesn't always need to be Mom. If there is more than one parent around, then it becomes important to



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take turns handling the extraction process as much as is practical. The more people who have experience in making the strategic retreat, the better off the team will be when an unexpected "situation" arises.

That means that the united front is an important part of developing those multiple lines of retreat. Adults, teens, and children with SPD all have one thing in common: they need to know how to exit a situation, whether it's a walk outside, a break in a quiet room, or an

all-out full-family get-out-of-Dodge moment.

All of the things I've talked about so far are important, and they all have a few things in common. The biggest commonality is that they are really difficult to do. Seriously, this is the tough stuff, but I wouldn't be talking about them if they weren't worth attempting. If you can't do all three, pick the one that you think is most likely to be doable, and go with that first. If you actually get two of the three lined up, toast yourself with a glass of champagne, or coffee, or whatever the heck juice boxes you find lying in the back of the fridge.

Some day your kid will have to fend for himself, and the most likely model for what he will do is what you do while he's growing up. That means that, when Grandma refuses to believe that her pumpkin-spice scented oils and proliferation of cinnamon brooms could possibly be a problem for your own little SPuDster, then you stubbornly and politely make your case, and, if necessary, you act on your words. You have the right to do so.

Similarly, you have the right to be just as stubborn when your child refuses to do things he dislikes doing. For example, when I was a child, at the holidays, I was allowed



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to take only the food I could tolerate onto my own plate (plain turkey that no dressing had touched, jellied cranberry sauce, and a roll; of course, they had to be arranged so none of them touched), but I was required to be polite throughout the process. This meant that, if I said rude things about any of the food I was offered or what other people ate, I would get taken aside for a little come-to-Jesus meetin' with Mom or Dad.

My parents had the right to prevent people from trying to force food I hated on me (because there are people who feel that children NEED stuffing and marshmallow-topped sweet potatoes), but they also had the right to require basic politeness and non-hostile behavior from me.

And that's actually important. As a parent, you have the right to raise your child, which means you have the right to be an activist for your child.

If standing up for your child means that you have to stand up to family members, that's okay. If making things work means doing things differently, that's okay too.

Have a happy Hallow-Thanks-Christmaskah! ♦

A woman with Asperger's syndrome, Jennifer provides countless tips to improve the lives of those with sensory difficulties. She is the author of How to Teach Life Skills to Kids with Autism or Asperger's (Future Horizons, 2010) and the recently released Growing Up with Sensory Issues (Sensory World, 2014).

