PACT

Parents And Children Together

Christmas Survival Guide for Adopters



Plan, Prepare, Anticipate

Christmas starts with you

Be real with yourself. Understand how you feel about Christmas. Let go of your baggage from past Christmases – it can interfere with your enjoyment of THIS Christmas and your ability to plan.

Acknowledge your hopes, dreams and ideals

Be prepared that these may need to change. Come to a point of acceptance that this will be YOUR Christmas – not perhaps the fairy tale Christmas, but yours to create.

Warn school

Over December, school routines are disrupted by play practice and craft activities. Your child could feel unsettled by this and that could cause behavioural problems. See if they can use a visual calendar at school and share that with you so you can help your child prepare.

Changes to rooms

Do you need to make room changes to fit in the Christmas tree? Plan in advance. Move furniture, etc. at the end of November. Let the children get used to that first. The tree and decorations will also change the look, feel and smell of the room. This can unsettle your child.

Be ready to interpret feelings

There are a number of feelings that occur in the same part of our bodies (excitement, nerves, anxiety, hunger all occur in the tummy). Children with an underdeveloped interoception system may misinterpret the signal their brain receives/experiences, e.g. excitement as nerves or hunger. You may need to help them interpret the differences.

Visit toy shops well in advance

See the difference between what your children gravitates to and what they play with for a long time. Consider buying the things that they play with for a long time.

Practice

Try some foods they may eat. Make it a game, e.g. 'taster sessions' or 'try something different today'. Practice Christmas dinner table behaviour, not every day, but make it fun.

Plan in oasis time

Or time for self-care. Be flexible, this may not always be achievable.

Model

Let them see your delight in choosing, buying, making, wrapping presents for other people. Let them join in!



Breaking things

Some children like to break things. Plan what to buy and how much to spend. Are there toys that can be dismantled and put back together?

Storage

Consider where you'll keep the new presents – perhaps give a gift of storage as part of the presents.

Sibling rivalry

Your children will need to see visually that their present sack/stack is the same size as each other's. They will also want to know that they have the same number of gifts. Be prepared that they may worry that a sibling will take the gifts that Santa intended for them. Make plans with the children for where Santa will put the presents, maybe they will be in your bedroom.

Warn your friends and family

You may need to do Christmas differently this year, especially if this is your first Christmas together. Tell your friends and family about your plans, gift giving arrangements and where or how you will be spending Christmas. Help them to understand that plans may also need to change at the last minute. Or you may find you need extra help. Try to get them onboard with your wishes early, this gives everyone the chance to get used them.

Post Christmas plan

There's a lot of time after Christmas day and before going back to school. Plan in advance. Most activities are closed for some days during this period, so explore where you can go and what you can do beforehand.

Logistics and practicalities

Set your budget

for presents and for food.

Traditions

Decide what traditions you want that are special to your family – great for this year and years to come. Co-create your own Christmas, some traditions may evolve over this period. Keep what works, ditch what did not.

Storage

Consider where you will keep the presents until you need them on Christmas morning.

Decide how you structure present opening

Do you open them all on Christmas morning or stagger it throughout the day (stockings pre-breakfast, Santa sacks post-breakfast, family presents after lunch, extended family on Boxing Day)? Do you spread the presents out over several days? This affects how you structure the Christmas period and helps you to prepare relatives.

Presents



Choose who you'll make presents for and let the children join in. Make sweets or biscuits, lavender bags, cards, etc. This keeps the children occupied, get co-regulation time with you, and get to enjoy and anticipate giving a gift.

Buy in advance

Go out with your child and guide them in choosing a present that is from you, so they know that they definitely have something and it is what they want. You may need to do this at the beginning of December.

Create a picture timetable
Think now, next, later. Encourage school to do this for school days. It brings predictability and order, and helps children cope. Create the one for the big day now.

Keep Christmas out of bedrooms
Don't decorate the children's bedrooms, let these be calm areas.

Christmas Eve
Peal and prepare all your vegetables for Christmas lunch

Oasis time
Plan in advance some films that you can watch together as a family. Maybe get a snuggle blanket and popcorn, or snacks, so you can relax a bit during the Christmas mayhem.



Myth busting

Elf on the shelf
This can be scary a mysterious elf that causes damage in the house in the night. Perhaps tell the elf he can only do things in one room.

Santa's naughty list
Remind children that in this family everyone is loved and gets gifts because they are loved.

Santa delivering presents
The idea of a strange man entering the house and into their bedrooms, while the children are asleep, can be scary. Develop a narrative to combat this and limit deliveries to safe spaces within the home.

Other myths
- Don't deserve... I am not loved enough for...
- I should feel guilty/worry about my birth family.
- Christmas is sad, unhappy, I'm forgotten, I make people angry.

Advent

Create a sensory advent calendar

Maybe create an advent tree/ stack
with a different book to read each night before Christmas (you could 7 days rather than 24 days).



Visits to Santa
Be aware that this can be scary for some children.

Wonder
Wonder with your child about their past Christmases and what they hope for (this is not present ideas). Keep the dialogue open and let them express excitements, fears, guilt, shame.

Christmas tree and decorations

Slow and steady
Decorations can gradually go up over a week or two.

Tree
Try putting up just the Christmas tree, either without decorations or with the lights switched off. Let the children get used to it.

Alternative Tree
Some children may want to put a paper tree on the wall or a window and create decorations that you can stick to that tree.



Wonder
Check in with the children and ask what they like, what they don't like and why. Talk about yours and their memories of past Christmases.

No presents under the tree
Put these out on Christmas night or morning. Many adopted children will open them all early, or find the anticipation is something else they have to struggle to hold.

Think Sensory
Some children will find the changes in the home when the decorations go up overwhelming and this can cause them to feel anything from unsettled to full meltdowns.

Noise: Some decorations make noise or play tunes. This may be challenging for some children.

Smell: Children can be triggered by the change in the smell of the home over Christmas.

Lights: Too many lights or flashing lights can be overwhelming or over-stimulating for children.

Make your own
The children may be more accepting of some decorations if they helped to make them.



Occupying their time before Christmas

Make
Make some decorations, e.g. paper chains, things to hang on the tree.

Bake
Making edible gifts is great fun. Make and ice biscuits or buns, or sweets. Eat mummy's or daddy's mistakes.

Knowledge is power
Create safety through connection, predictability and curiosity.

Support network
Engage with your support network. Invite them to offer support and help.

Forage



Find pinecones or holly to include in your decorations.



Structure and supervision

create a calmer Christmas, so do activities together. Keep going with what works, as this effectively scaffolds your children to cope.

Explore anticipations

Wonder with your children. Exploring what they are anticipating can give you ideas, but it also enables you to disarm any myths and unrealistic expectations. If this is your first Christmas as a family, get an understanding of what happened in previous Christmases. This will help you to allay any fears they may be harbouring.

Presents for the big day

Don't wrap them all



Put some in a sack or pillowcase. This can reduce some children's stress and anxiety.

Not too many

Too much and too expensive can be overwhelming.

Present pile

It needs to be the same size and number as a siblings.

Reduce over-stimulation

Pad out the presents with other gifts, e.g. a new quilt cover, clothes, a cushion, a toothbrush, a toy box.



Batteries and assemble toys

Put batteries in beforehand (have spares to hand) and make toys ready to play with straight away.

Choose things you are happy to play with over and over

Consider senses

Some children may like noises, smells or flashing lights that stimulate their senses, others will find these overpowering.

When to put the presents out

Try after the children have gone to sleep and before you go to bed. If that didn't work last year, can Santa pop them in the garage? You can get them in the morning.

Party time, meals out, pantomimes & fairs

Pick and choose

Too many activities away from the home can be over-stimulating.

Fussy eaters

Take a packed meal with you for fussy eaters who may not like the different food at the party.

Handbag/manbag games
Take small toys/games with you in case they get bored. These may be games that you need to play with them whilst you're talking, e.g. dominos or pick up sticks.

Grazing
Be aware that if there's a buffet, some children do not have fully developed interoception systems and may not know when they are full, so over-eat.

The big day

Be kind to yourself
It's not a holiday day. Children get up too early and will be tired and crabby later. This may feel like a very full-on stressful day for you. Take the pressure off. You have planned in advance, now go with the flow. You've got this.

Remember
Past Christmases may come to haunt. Remember, that is your past experiences as well as the children's.

Structure
Keep to their routine for mealtimes and bedtimes, etc. Be consistent with your boundaries.

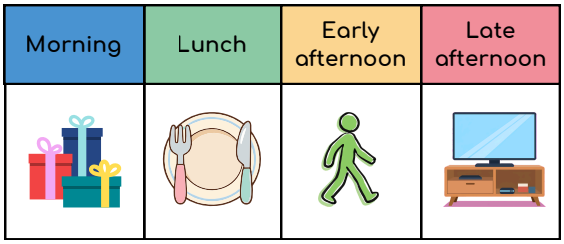
Food
Be ready with their regular food just in case, e.g. chicken nougats or shepherds' pie. Christmas lunch may need to be at dinner time and Christmas day tea at lunch time. Do it your family's way.

Christmas Crackers
Some children find the bang too much. Maybe take out the snap beforehand.

Getting dressed
Go with the flow. This may end up being a pj day, or they may want to wear what they received as a present – not the clothes you planned.

Reactions to presents
Remember the younger the child, the more fun the box and wrapping paper are and they may ignore the present. Put some of the presents to one side, to play with tomorrow.

Visual timetable
Use the visual timetable you created to help the children cope with the day. Maybe use an egg timer to show them when they are going to change from play to eating. Stick to your present opening plan.



Embrace the chaos
Things don't have to run perfectly. This is your day with all the querky, imperfections that go with it.

Go out
Get outdoors, go for a walk. This helps some children burn off energy and others to engage the proprioception that will help settle them.

Play with your children

Most children will want you to play with them, they won't entertain themselves, especially when they want to show you how their new toy/game works.

Oasis time

Remember the video you planned. Do the children want to watch it with you so at least you get to stop for a bit, even if you are not on your own

Post Christmas blues

Don't worry

The post-Christmas blues happens to a lot of people.

Avoid self-recrimination

The day has gone. It may not have been what you imagined. Try to take enjoyment out of what worked well. Christmas is more than just one day.

Keep stable routines

Reflect

with your children about what they enjoyed about this Christmas. Which traditions do you want to keep and which one's do you want to ditch.

Use your presence

to help children co-regulate. Play with them to help them explore their new or old presents.



Connect and reflect

Reflect on your Christmases as a child, what did you enjoy?

Between Christmas and New Year

Use your 'Post-Christmas plan' of activities

Invite your support network

to help you out.

Use your presence

to co-regulate your children.

Self-regulation

If you are feeling stressed, angry, upset, broken and despairing, your children will pick up on this and feel the same, so try to stay regulated.

Go outdoors

