



### **Tips for Creating a Positive Santa Experience**

Although many families like to take photos of their children sitting on Santa's lap, some children simply do not enjoy the Santa experience. Visiting Santa often requires that children endure noise and crowds, wait in line for long periods, and then sit on the lap of a stranger dressed up in a costume. Children with autism may find this experience to be overwhelming, confusing, or even scary.

Below are some suggestions for creating a more positive and friendly Santa experience for your child. The links will take you to examples of the recommended strategies:

- Make a picture book or visual schedule to prepare your child for the event.
- Familiarize your child with the setting and location in advance by taking photos or bringing your child to watch Santa from afar.
- Give your child practice going through the steps of visiting Santa (e.g., waiting in line, walking up the steps to Santa's chair, etc.) at times when the store or mall is quiet and Santa is not present.
- Bring a toy (such as a squeeze ball) that your child can hold and play with while waiting in line.
- Provide a "First-Then" schedule that illustrates the reward your child will get after the Santa visit.
- Role play with your child how he or she can respond to questions that Santa might ask. Better yet, tell Santa what questions to ask your child.

Consider asking the store or mall management to designate a special time for children with autism to visit Santa. Examples of specific accommodations that would be helpful are:

- Lower or turn off the music.
- Dim the lights.
- Schedule Santa at a time when the mall or store is typically closed to shoppers.
- Provide training to Santa and his helpers about how the social, language, and behavioral features of autism might affect children's ability to interact with Santa.
- Use masking tape to mark the floor with arrows (to indicate the route that children will take to get to Santa) and "X"s (to indicate where children should stand or sit).
- Create a "quiet area" where children can go if they begin to feel overwhelmed or distressed.
- Create a "play area" where children can go to entertain themselves while waiting for their turn with Santa.
- Use a numbering system so children do not need to stand in line while waiting for their turn.
- Move all delicate or breakable items away from the Santa area.

Whether or not visiting Santa is a tradition for your family, we wish you a very happy holiday season!