



Anderson Center Consulting Autism Spectrum Disorder: Thanksgiving Tips



Activity or Custom	Why this is challenging for people with autism?	What supports and strategies may be helpful?
Anticipating the holiday	Whether the individual is very excited about the day or a little nervous, some individuals with autism may find waiting for the holiday stressful and may perseverate on when it is coming or what will occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share specific information about your plans for Thanksgiving. Where will you celebrate Thanksgiving? Who will be there? What food will be served? Consider using a visual support for the individual to reference (social story, written information, photos). • Cross off days on a calendar to show how many remain until Thanksgiving. • To reduce stress, identify a limit of how many questions and conversations about Thanksgiving can occur each day.
Decorations in the home, neighborhood and community	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about Thanksgiving in advance. Discuss options for decorating at home. • To help desensitize or reduce anxiety, offer arts and crafts activities for the individual to complete. Decorate “Happy Thanksgiving” cards for veterans, people living in nursing homes or shelters, friends and family.
Gathering of family and friends at the individual’s home	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety. This can include not having work or school on Thursday or Friday, temporary environmental changes in the home (like visitors staying in the guest room) and having familiar and less familiar people come to spend the day/evening in the home.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a schedule for the day and let the individual know what to expect (visitors arriving at 1:00pm, eating dinner at 3:00pm, everyone watches football at 4:00pm, dessert served at 5:00pm, guests leave around 6:30pm). • Identify questions visitors may ask (“What grade are you in now?”, “Are you playing a sport?”, “What are you thankful for?”) and practice greeting others/ having a conversation in advance. Some individuals may not be comfortable greeting guests; allow individuals to socialize if/when they feel comfortable doing so. • Include the individual in the preparation by helping to set the table, make place cards, move chairs. • Schedule breaks from the festivities or encourage the individual to take a break when the environment gets too noisy or busy. Have favorite sensory or calming items available. • Remember to praise the individual throughout the day (e.g., “I know having so many people in our house is hard for you. I’m so proud of how you’re managing!” or “Great job talking to Grandma!”).
Celebrating Thanksgiving at someone else’s home	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the plan for celebrating Thanksgiving in advance. • Ask the host about the anticipated schedule for the day and how many guests are expected. Review the schedule with the individual in advance and remind the person that schedules can change.



Anderson Center Consulting Autism Spectrum Disorder: Thanksgiving Tips



Thanksgiving Activity or Custom	Why this is challenging for people with Autism?	What supports and strategies may be helpful?
Celebrating Thanksgiving at someone else's home	Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the host if there is a designated place within the home that can be used for the individual to take a break if the environment gets too noisy or busy. Have favorite sensory or calming items available. • Bring preferred items and activities and any communication or visual supports typically used at home. • Make a plan for how long you plan to stay. If an individual has great difficulty in less familiar places, plan to arrive closer to the scheduled meal time and to leave at an identified time. • Remember to praise the individual throughout the day (e.g., "You did a great job talking with your cousins!" or "I'm glad you took a quick break. It was so noisy in the living room.").
Thanksgiving meal	<p>Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety.</p> <p>Some people with autism have sensory sensitivities that cause them to have aversions to certain textures, smells, tastes, sounds or lighting which may cause feelings of upset or anxiety. (The sounds, smells, tastes and textures related to cooking, serving and eating Thanksgiving dinner may be overwhelming for the individual).</p> <p>Some individuals with autism have particular or selective diets due to sensory sensitivities, gastrointestinal issues, allergies or the need for consistency and routine.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible, plan the meal for a time similar to when dinner is typically served. If that is not possible, share the change in routine with the individual well in advance of Thanksgiving day. • Include in the meal, foods that the individual enjoys or typically eats. • If eating at someone else's home ask the host what foods they plan to serve. Consider bringing a pre-cooked meal or preferred foods for the individual to eat if they do not enjoy or typically eat the foods being served. • Think about and plan in advance where the individual and guests will be seated. Does the individual have a specific chair or place at the table that they prefer? If so, plan accordingly. • Encourage or empower the individual to take a break from the meal if the environment becomes too noisy or busy.
Dressing for a holiday	<p>Things that are unfamiliar or changes to usual routines can cause anxiety.</p> <p>Some people with autism have sensory sensitivities specific to the feel of certain fabrics, labels or elastic in clothing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honor the individual's sensory preferences with regard to clothing options. If a special holiday photo is to occur, plan a specific outfit for the photo and for the individual to change to the preferred clothing option after the photo is taken.