

# SURVIVING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

# TIPS FOR PARENTS



## Tips and Strategies for a Calmer, Happier Break

### INTRODUCTION

For many families, school holidays are a time of excitement, relaxation, and bonding. However, for parents and carers of autistic children, these extended breaks can also bring unique challenges. The predictable routines of school days are replaced by unstructured time, changes in routine, unpredictable social situations, and increased sensory demands. Navigating these weeks requires patience, preparation, and creativity, but above all, compassion for your child and yourself.

This guide provides top tips for surviving, and thriving, during the school holidays, focusing on practical strategies like using visual schedules, balancing rest and boredom, preparing for changes, considering sensory needs, and advocating for reasonable adjustments. Whether it's your first holiday break or you're a seasoned expert, these tools are designed to help you and your child enjoy the time together.

### 1. Create and Use Visual Schedules

Structure is vital for many autistic children. The predictability of routines helps them feel safe and in control, and the sudden removal of a school timetable can lead to anxiety or dysregulation.

- Develop a daily visual schedule: Use pictures, symbols, or written lists to outline each day's activities. This can be as simple as printed icons for breakfast, play, lunch, outings, quiet time, and bedtime.
- Review the schedule each morning: Go through the day together, setting expectations and answering any questions your child may have.
- Allow for flexibility: If plans change, update the schedule and talk through the adjustments. Visual timetables can help make changes less overwhelming.

## 2. Balance Rest and Boredom

School holidays can swing between too much downtime and overstimulation from endless activities. It's important to find a healthy balance.

- Incorporate rest periods: Schedule breaks and downtime for your child to recharge. This can include quiet play, reading, or simply relaxing in a low-stimulation space.
- Combat boredom with low-pressure activities: Prepare a “boredom box” with sensory toys, craft materials, puzzles, or favourite books. When your child is at a loose end, invite them to pick something from the box.
- Monitor for signs of overwhelm: If your child starts to show signs of distress, agitation, or tiredness, it may be time for a break, even if you're in the middle of an outing.

## 3. Pick Your Battles

During holidays, routines change and expectations shift, which can lead to more frequent power struggles. Choose which issues are truly important and let go of those that aren't.

- Prioritise your child's wellbeing: Focus on what matters most, safety, happiness, and engagement. Minor disruptions or unusual behaviours may be part of your child's way of coping with changes.
- Be flexible with expectations: If your child wants to wear the same comfortable clothes every day or eat the same lunch, it's okay.
- Celebrate small wins: Every positive moment counts. A successful outing, a new skill, or a peaceful hour is worth acknowledging.

## 4. Prepare for Changes and Use Visuals and Social Stories

Changes are inevitable during school holidays, whether it's a last-minute change of plan or a new activity. Preparing your child ahead of time can make transitions smoother.

- Use social stories: Write or find simple stories that explain upcoming events or changes, like visiting a new place or having a guest over. These stories should outline what will happen, how your child might feel, and what they can do if they feel anxious.
- Incorporate visuals for new experiences: Show photos or videos of places you're visiting. If you're going to a museum, for example, look at the website together and talk about what to expect.
- Practice at home: Do trial runs of new routines or activities. For example, if you're taking public transport, role play at home or do a short, low-pressure trip first.

## 5. Consider Sensory Needs

Many autistic children experience the world in a heightened sensory way. The school holidays can bring new environments, sounds, smells, and crowds that may be overwhelming.

- Identify triggers: Be aware of situations or places that cause sensory overload for your child, like noisy shopping centres, busy playgrounds, or bright lights.
- Plan around sensory needs: Choose quieter times to visit public places, bring noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses, or fidget toys, and know where quiet spaces are if your child needs a break.
- Communicate your child's needs: If you're attending events or seeing friends, let others know what helps your child feel comfortable.

## 6. Communicate Clearly

Clear, direct communication can help autistic children understand what is happening and how they are expected to respond.

- Use simple language: Break instructions into small, manageable steps. Avoid idioms or ambiguous phrases.
- Check for understanding: Ask your child to repeat instructions or explain what's happening in their own words.
- Offer choices: Providing options can help your child feel more in control (e.g., "Would you like to go to the park or stay home and do crafts?")
- re taking public transport, role play at home or do a short, low-pressure trip first.

## 7. Take Sensory Aids Everywhere

Sensory aids are essential tools for many autistic children and can make outings more enjoyable and less stressful.

- Pack a sensory kit: Include headphones, chewable jewellery, sensory toys, sunglasses, weighted items, or whatever supports your child best.
- Have spares: If possible, keep extra sensory aids in the car or your bag in case one gets lost or damaged.
- Be proactive: Offer aids before your child shows signs of distress, especially in unfamiliar or potentially overwhelming settings.

## 8. Ask for Reasonable Adjustments

Under equality laws in many countries, your child is entitled to reasonable adjustments in public places, leisure venues, and attractions.

- Contact venues in advance: Ask about quieter times, accessibility, or if they offer sensory-friendly sessions.
- Request adjustments: These might include skipping queues, using a quiet room, or bringing your own food if your child has dietary needs.
- Show supporting documentation: Carrying a diagnosis letter, access card, or similar paperwork can help when requesting adjustments.

## 9. Make the Most of Free or Discounted Entry for Carers

Many attractions, museums, cinemas, and swimming pools offer free or discounted entry for carers accompanying disabled children.

- Research attractions: Look online for venues with carer discounts or free entry. Keep a list for easy reference.
- Bring proof of your caring role: Some places may request a carer's card, DLA/PIP letter, or other documentation.

## 10. Take Care of Yourself

Surviving the school holidays isn't just about supporting your child; it's also about looking after your own wellbeing.

- Accept help: If friends or family offer to help, take them up on it, even if it's just for an hour to yourself.
- Connect with other parents: Local support groups or online communities can be a lifeline for sharing advice, solidarity, and encouragement.
- Be kind to yourself: You're doing an incredible job, and it's okay if not everything goes perfectly. Celebrate the small victories and learn from the tough moments.

## Conclusion

The school holidays will always come with challenges, but with thoughtful preparation, self-compassion, and the right strategies, they can also bring joy, growth, and memories for your family. Every child is unique, so adapt these tips to suit your situation, and remember: you know your child best. With patience and planning, you can help your child, and yourself, make the most of the break ahead.