

Holiday 2022 Blog: Ho Ho Ho. Oh no!

#1. Plan for the worst. I know this sounds terrible to say, but if you want the holidays to be fun and wonderful and easy, *don't expect the holidays to be fun and wonderful and easy!* You **MUST** plan for the worst. What if your child has tantrums in the car, at a party, in the boring store, and/or in the noisy restaurant? Do you have a specific plan for each likely scenario? Here are some examples of *planning for the worst* to make the holidays the best.

Going to the mall and/or restaurant: Wife to husband, "I've got the iPad for Jacob to keep him from getting bored. And let's plan on going to Red Robin (his favorite) *before* it gets too busy and noisy. But if he loses it in the mall or the restaurant, honey, let's plan on getting him out to the car for a 'car time out' quickly. Would you take him to the car and I'll finish up shopping or eating with Charlie (Jacob's brother)?" Of course, a good husband agrees with the plan. Often outings are a two-person job. So, plan on it.

Going to a relative's house: Wife to husband: "Would you call up your brother and ask him to set up a quiet room in their home where Jacob can get away from the party and watch *Cars*?" Husband to wife: "That's a great idea." *Have a safe space at every place!* Plan on it.

For those long vacation car rides: I am well known for NOT recommending screens and for reducing screen time to 1-2 hours total time per day. Guess what? When it comes to long car rides, I heartily endorse in-car movies and the liberal use of iPads, iPhones, headphones, Nintendo switches—whatever screen you have to keep the children happy. Favorite books, favorite snacks, favorite toys to hold—whatever will keep the kids quiet in the car.

Keep the micro environment familiar and rewarding (See #2 below). But *plan for the worst*. For instance: When Jacob and Charlie start fighting in the back seat ("Jacob won't stop humming! Jacob, stop humming!"). You try **reasoning**, you try **distraction** ("Charlie, humming is part of your brother's autism. Put on your headphones and play on your Nintendo Switch. Jacob, keep your humming down."). You **mirror their feelings** ("I know. A long ride is so hard." see Practical tip #3); you finally resort to **threatening** dire consequences ("If you guys don't stop fighting, no TV tonight in the hotel!"). Nothing works. And Jacob starts kicking the back of the driver's seat, pulling your hair, and pounding the window and you have no idea why (because Charlie hit him for humming without your seeing him do it!). Do you have a plan?

Here's my plan: Tell them in a loud, clear, and not-so-nice voice: "I can't drive when you are acting like this! We are going to have (say it loud) **A CAR TIME OUT!**" Then, safely, but as soon as you can, pull the car over. Get out the fattest book you own (I recommend Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) and read (or pretend to read) for a *full 10 minutes*. Make sure it's very boring for the children (Charlie: "Mom let's GO already." Jacob yelling: "Go! Go! Go!"). Then use CAR TIME OUT as a real (and practical) threat the next time they start acting up: "Do you boys want a CAR TIME OUT?!" ("*No, mom. Anything but a CAR TIME OUT!* Then you better behave.") Expect the car ride to take a half an hour longer than usual. Plan on it.

#2. Keep the micro-environment familiar and rewarding. Create a familiar "micro-environment," a protective bubble, around your child. If your child can understand schedules, create a **daily holiday schedule** on paper, on iPad, or in pictures so the child knows what's coming next. **Give advance notice** (not too far in advance) so there are no sudden, unexpected changes. **Use little rewards** (food or prizes—stickers, match box cars, little collectibles) to motivate: "When we get to the restaurant, I've got a prize for you." Make sure you **travel with all the familiar easy-to-move objects** including electronics (iPad, iPhone), videos, YouTube, favorite music with headphones, familiar clothes, blanket ('blanky'), pillows, stuffed animals, comfort food/snacks, and perhaps most importantly familiar people (See #1 above). Plan on it.

#3. Mirror back the child's feelings Throughout all the transitions there are going to be lots of feelings of anxiety, not wanting to go places, need for control, even panicky moments. I'm a big fan of "mirroring the child's feelings" by *telling* them (not asking them) how they feel. When the child indicates gesturally or says, "No car. No Grandma. Stinky Grandma." Typically, parents will say things like: "But you *love* Grandma's and it's going to be fun." But that would not be acknowledging the child's feelings. Instead say: "You don't want to go in the car to Grandma's. It's stinky at Grandma's, so many smells. I know." The child will feel heard, and this usually calms the child down immediately.

What about the repeated "OCD Question" (usually from the child with high anxiety and high functioning autism)? "Why are we going to Grandma's? Why are we going to Grandma's?" A hundred times! Parents typically say: "We're going to Grandma's for Thanksgiving." But the child doesn't stop because he is not *really* asking a question; he's saying: "I don't want to go to

Grandma's." Again, mirror the child's feeling: "I know. It's noisy at Grandma's; there are lots of new people there. It's hard." If you are right, the child will say "Yeah," the universal response to mirroring feelings accurately. Then say, "I know, it's hard at Grandma's; but we're going to have a special, quiet room for you to watch your *favorite* movies." Often this will stop the OCD questions. When you recognize feelings related to transitions, upsets will decrease. Plan on it.

Just remember: If you're fighting and yelling, you're doing something wrong. By being prepared for the worst, creating a micro-environment, and mirroring feelings you will be able to keep your frustration levels low and retain your sense of humor to give your children a message that the holidays can be a fun, that the holidays *will* be fun. Plan on it!

For more ideas on ways to make transitions easier, check out The PLAY Project's [mini-course](#) on this topic and download a free chapter called "[Dr. Rick's 20 Transition Tricks](#)". from Dr. Rick's book, [Autism: The Potential Within](#).