ADOPTION EASTMIDLANDS

CHRISTMAS YOUR WAY



Christmas reflections by the Complex Trauma and Education Co-Production Groups.

We all agree that the festive season is a tricky time of year for adoptive families. In January, when the complex trauma group met, everyone was feeling deflated by the challenges of the Christmas period.

So, in anticipation of the challenges as well as celebrations, we've decided this year that we would like to get some of our thoughts down, in the hope that it can be of use to other adopters as Christmas approaches.

The Tricky Stuff...



School

Parent: *"Are you looking forward to the school carol concert in church tomorrow?"*

Son: *"I'd rather be buried alive!"*

Christmas brings many challenges for our children:

- The excitement, sweets, noise, and lights of the school disco.
- The anxiety of standing on stage for the school play in front of everyone; changes to the school routine and not knowing what's happening from one day to the next.
- For teenagers in years 10 and 11, the pressure of sitting tests and mocks, expected to do well despite the Christmas frenzy around them.

This is the perfect recipe for dysregulation, not just for children but also for the parents in the audience, holding their breath and hoping that everything will be okay and that their child will make it through to the end.

For those with neurodiverse children, here's a link to a poem called **Autism at Christmas**, which you may resonate with.

Presents for all the children who are 'good'

As for Santa, it turns out he's actually not so great after all...

"Am I good or bad?" are the worries of many adopted children. The media's portrayal of Santa bringing presents only to good children can trigger feelings of shame. Layering on top of all the thoughts about whether they are good or bad every day are compounded by the school reward systems that constantly judge whether our children meet the criteria for a reward.

When the presents DO come, the overwhelm is huge.

- My sisters got more than me...
- I've got so many presents my excitement is overwhelming...literally.
- I don't have as many presents as my friend up the road.
- Have I been good enough?
- Am I good enough?



So, what can we do?

A few tips from us...

- Talk to your child about Christmas and their worries and anxieties to help them feel heard.
- Reassure them that presents will come, and if they don't believe you, show them the presents arriving each day and put them under the tree on display.
- Remind your children how amazing they are, emphasising that everyone is good and bad at times, and that's okay.



Family Parties

There are so many expectations around us as families at Christmas. Sitting together for dinner, giving and receiving presents, what food we are eating, behaviour, traditions.... Such a minefield of things to navigate for children and young people who are already struggling with the everyday relationships and routines of life.

Parent: *"My daughter can't even look at the food we eat at Christmas, she needs a special plate for herself with her safe foods on it."*

Parent: *"Pizza for Christmas day at our house."*

Parent: *"It's a beige buffet for us."*

It is challenging for parents too! Small talk, peace negotiating between family members, trying to enjoy each other's company, all squashed up on the sofas and in small living rooms.
Our children are grieving – for all the losses that have happened over the years. Memories triggered by Christmas of placement moves, losses of relationships, and of Christmases gone wrong.

A few more tips...

- To prevent over-excitement, consider bringing out a couple of presents each day over the Christmas period. If your child can't wait, have Christmas early!
- Make your child's Christmas plate "safe" at family parties by getting to the food first, ensuring they can choose and have some control, and informing everyone not to offer them anything that might repulse them.
- Don't feel pressured into a traditional Christmas meal; celebrate in your own way, whether that's with a beige buffet or pizza.
- Regularly communicate with your school throughout the Christmas period about planned activities, and if something is too much for your child, discuss it with the teacher.



How can schools support your child

Here are some examples of what our children's schools are doing to support them over the festive period:

- They allowed my son to sit out of the nativity play because he can't sit still. Instead, he helps by finishing tasks in the classroom, which makes him really happy.
- My daughter's school recorded part of the nativity, so the children only have to perform some of it live.
- They use a visual timetable and provide support for transitioning into the holidays and back again in January.
- Ask your child's teacher to give them a transitional object to bring home over the holidays, something small and inexpensive that can reassure your child that they're held in mind and reduces the fear of change and going back.
- Ask your child's teacher or Key Worker to send them a quick postcard or Christmas card that will help your child see that they're held in mind, reduce the fear of change and coming back and we shouldn't underestimate how special they will feel receiving post just for them.

Make your own traditions

It's important you do what's right for your child and family:

- Make space for downtime and for repair if that's needed.
- Stay at home if that's what your family prefers.
- Don't feel pressured to meet the needs of others.
- Keep things calm and keep to normal routines and bedtimes.



"Our children are off the scale brave everyday."