

## Doing Christmas Differently

*For families of young children Christmas is both an exciting and stressful time. Here, two parents of disabled children, Rachael Clark and Katherine Runswick-Cole, talk about doing Christmas differently.*

The image of a 'perfect' Christmas with a happy, 'normal' family with mum, dad, grandparents and cheerful children is a daunting one for many families for a host of different reasons: separation, divorce, poverty, and family conflict all threaten the Christmas card dream. Families of disabled children are just like any other and face many of the same joys and challenges at Christmas, but some families of disabled children and children with special needs Christmas is a time when it helps to do things a bit differently. Here, we talk about some ideas on how to find your way through!

### **Decorations – there's a tree in the house!**

A Christmas tree and decorations are at the heart of the picture perfect Christmas, but for some families they present challenges. For some children decorations are just confusing. Why would you bring a tree into the house and clutter up the window-sills with cards and the house with unfamiliar sparkly objects? For these children preparation is the key. You can use photos of last year's tree or get out the Christmas decorations for the children to see and touch before decorations start going up. For some children, a social story<sup>1</sup> might be useful for explaining that trees are usually brought into houses at Christmas and that this is OK. For other children, a timetable showing when the tree and other decorations will arrive and when they will all come down is important – this might be

---

1 For more information about Social Stories go to:  
<http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories>

something you simply add on to the advent calendar, if you have one. For many children, decorating the tree is a Christmas joy, for others it is not – decorations are often fragile and delicate, some fingers can struggle with putting them on the tree and what should be a treat becomes a frustrating chore. In the ‘perfect’ Christmas the family decorate the tree together, doing Christmas differently may mean that doesn’t happen.

For some children the tree is a constant source of fascination - things to pull off, pick apart and eat! The tree then becomes a source of tension and anxiety as parents become locked into a battle to make sure the tree remains intact and the child safe. We know one family where the battle became so relentless that they abandoned the traditional tree and decorated the ceiling instead. The much admired ceiling decorations, safely out of reach, allowed the family to do Christmas decorations, albeit differently.

## **Presents**

Presents are a key part of the ‘perfect’ Christmas, and doing Christmas differently sometime means doing presents differently too. Some children look forward with excitement and are happy not knowing what is in the oddly shaped parcel under the tree, for other children this can be a source of real anxiety. They want to know that the gift they asked for is really in that parcel – the not knowing is too much to bear. Doing Christmas differently may mean telling the child what is in the present or even showing it to them before hand. The immediate run up to the big day can be eased by allowing children to open a small present once a day, or every other day, this breaks the tension and reduces anxiety.

Beautifully wrapped presents look wonderful under the tree, but for many children a tightly wrapped present is a source of frustration – so much so that some children give up and refuse to open presents.

Tissue paper makes the best wrapping paper for some children as it is easy to tear, for others a small amount of tape might be the answer - tightly knotted bows are not a good idea. It is also helpful to take the present out of the box before wrapping it, especially if the present has been tightly fixed inside its cardboard box with wire. Tell friends and relatives your child's wrapping needs, especially if the child is going to open a present in front of them!

### **Father Christmas**

Father Christmas is often the source of presents at Christmas. Doing Christmas differently means thinking some of this through. Some children worry about a strange man with a beard coming into their room at night, even if he does carry presents. Father Christmas can leave presents by the fireplace or under the tree and never need venture upstairs at all. Most children enjoy the Father Christmas story and eventually they realise that it is a story which they are happy to leave behind, however, some children will not come to that conclusion on their own. We know several families with teenage children where their belief in Father Christmas is still firm. Parents/carers worry about what other children will tell their child as they grow older and whether they, as parents/carers, should continue to collude with the Father Christmas story. This is a tricky one for families. Each child and family will be different, you may decide you need to be direct with the young person or you may decide to try and phase Father Christmas out over a number of years reducing the references to him until the young person is happy to let go. Or you may simply decide that the young person is so attached to Father Christmas that you just let it carry on, no matter what their age.

### **Visitors**

Father Christmas is not the only visitor at Christmas and guests can also be a joy and a challenge at Christmas. Just like children, guests may need preparation! Be upfront, if something is difficult for you and your child, say so! So tell them your child needs tissue paper not wrapping paper and whether or not you want them to mention Father Christmas.

We know from experience there are times when doing Christmas differently in front of relatives and friends is stressful, especially when a child doesn't want to join in or finds something that is supposed to be 'joyful' a source of anxiety. So sometimes, we know that families opt out – you may prefer to limit the number of guests and the time they spend in your house at Christmas.

### **Christmas in early years settings**

Many early years settings are sensitive to the challenges faced by young children at Christmas and recognize the difficulties children face from a mixture of excitement and uncertainty. They, like parents/carers, need to prepare children for the changes in routine and activities in the run up to Christmas. Wherever possible, it is a good idea to keep the run up to Christmas short. Singing carols in September is best avoided for all young children, even if the Christmas performance is less slick than it might have been, parents/carers will be grateful to the practitioners for not starting the Christmas excitement/anxiety early!

The Christmas play is another part of the 'perfect' Christmas. Seeing your child as Mary, Joseph or even a sheep in the Christmas performance can be the highlight of a parent/carer's Christmas. Early years practitioners strive to make the performance special for families, this is not an easy task. Some children are reluctant to take part in the performance, and, sadly, we've witnessed unhappy children being dragged onto the stage at Christmas. We know that

this has often been done with the best of intentions but for parents/carers witnessing this act of 'inclusion' and for the children themselves it is traumatic. Similarly, we've known parents turn up at a performance and sit through the whole thing without their child ever making an appearance. Sitting in an audience with other parents seemingly having a 'perfect' Christmas when your child is either unhappily 'participating' or simply excluded from the stage is agony for parents/carers, especially when they are already having to negotiate a host of challenges at Christmas. Many practitioners do recognize these issues and understand that sensitive communication with parents/carers and children is key to a happy performance experience. The extent to which a child participates may have to be negotiated with the practitioner, child and parents/carers wherever possible.

### **We all do Christmas differently ...**

Finally, *all* families do Christmas differently. We suspect that the picture perfect Christmas is a myth that no family can live up to, but realising this may just be the key to having a happy Christmas.

*Rachael Clark is the mother of a disabled child and campaigns for disabled children's rights in her local area.*

*Katherine Runswick-Cole is the mother of a disabled child and Research Fellow in Disability Studies and Psychology in the Research Institute of Health and Social Change at Manchester Metropolitan University.*

*Contact: K.Runswick-Cole@mmu.ac.uk*