



Pediatric Learning Center, Inc.
Therapy, Education, & Support

Preparing for Thanksgiving **by: Hope White, MOTR/L**

Thanksgiving can be overwhelming for kids with sensory processing challenges, but with the right preparation, it can be a positive and enjoyable experience. Here are some strategies to help make Thanksgiving smoother for your child.

1. Preparing for Thanksgiving Day

- Create a Visual Schedule or Social Story:
 - Prepare a visual schedule or social story for your child to explain what will happen on Thanksgiving. This can help reduce anxiety and prepare them for transitions. Include things like traveling, arriving at a new location, seeing family, mealtime, and any sensory-friendly breaks.
- Practice Expected Sensory Inputs:
 - Talk about and practice the different sensory experiences your child might encounter, like noisy conversations, different smells from the kitchen, crowded spaces, and new textures in food. Preparing your child in advance can help them feel more comfortable. You can use noise-canceling headphones, scented candles for smells, or textured items like a soft cloth for touch practice.
- Teach Key Words and Phrases:
 - Prepare your child with simple phrases they can use during the event. For example, “All done” when they need a break, “Help” if they’re overwhelmed, or “Play” when they need to move around. Practice these ahead of time so they feel comfortable using them.

2. During Thanksgiving Festivities

- Create a Sensory Retreat Space:
 - Set up a calm, quiet area where your child can go if they become overwhelmed. This space can include favorite toys, a weighted blanket, or noise-canceling headphones. Let your child know they can take breaks whenever they need to.
- Help with Communication:
 - Encourage your child to express their needs by using simple sentences or a communication board. If your child uses PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), or AAC device have it available. Make sure family members understand how to communicate with your child in a patient and supportive way.

- Gradual Exposure to Sensory Experiences:
 - If possible, gradually introduce your child to the Thanksgiving setting. Arriving early or visiting the location beforehand may help them acclimate to the environment. Start with shorter exposures to noisy rooms or unfamiliar smells, and give them breaks as needed.

3. Mealtime Strategies

- Familiar Foods:
 - Bring familiar foods your child enjoys to the Thanksgiving table. This will give them options they are comfortable with, and may reduce mealtime stress. Allow them to touch or explore new foods at their own pace without pressure.
- Encourage Communication at the Table:
 - Give your child simple tools to communicate during the meal, such as requesting “more” or saying “all done.” If verbal communication is challenging, you can use signs or picture cards.
- Familiar Plates and Utensils:
 - Bring familiar plates, utensils, and cups your child is comfortable with. This will reduce stress by decreasing amount of new stimuli that is presented to them.

4. Preparing for Family Interactions

- Role-Play Social Interactions:
 - Practice greetings, saying or using signs for "thank you," and basic social interactions with family members. Use toys or pictures to role-play family members who might be present. Preparing for social interactions can help reduce anxiety and improve communication.
- Respect Their Space:
 - Let family members know ahead of time that your child may need extra personal space or may not want to engage in hugs or physical touch. Encourage them to ask before touching or hugging.

5. Other Helpful Tips

- Movement Breaks:
 - Incorporate sensory-friendly movement breaks before and during Thanksgiving. Jumping, swinging, or even stretching can help calm your child. These breaks can help regulate sensory input and reduce feelings of overstimulation.
- Predictable Transitions:

- Give your child clear signals when transitions are about to happen. For example, “In five minutes, we will go to the table to eat,” or, “After dessert, it will be time for play.” This helps reduce surprises and lets them feel more in control. You could also use a visual timer if they are familiar with them.

Thanksgiving can be an overwhelming experience for children, especially those with sensory processing challenges. Although, with the right preparation and support, it can be a more enjoyable time for everyone. Be sure to prepare in advance, communicate with family members, and make sure your child knows it’s okay to take breaks whenever they need them.

Happy Thanksgiving!!!