

MAKE BRAIN-HEALTHY CHOICES THIS HOLIDAY SEASON



The holiday season, while magical, can be particularly challenging for parents of children who struggle with focus, emotional regulation, sensory processing, or socializing. The impact of changes in routine, late nights, and the abundance of sugary, unhealthy foods can put extra strain on a child's brain, making it harder for them to stay regulated and calm. However, with thoughtful planning and the right tools, you can reduce the impact these stressors have on your child and help them navigate the season smoothly.

In this guide, you'll get practical, parent-tested tips for minimizing stress, creating a sensory-friendly environment, and maintaining emotional balance. Plus, there's a section on brain-healthy holiday treats to keep your child's nutrition in check, even during festive celebrations.



Prepare for Sensory Overload

TIP:

Before any holiday event, prepare your child by discussing what they might encounter. This could include bright lights, loud music, or unfamiliar environments.



WHY IT WORKS:

This helps your child mentally brace for the event and reduces the shock of unexpected sensory stimuli. Bring noise-canceling headphones or sunglasses to help them handle overwhelming situations.



Keep Routines Consistent

TIP:

Even amidst holiday excitement, stick to your child's regular routine as much as possible, including meal times, quiet breaks and bedtimes.

WHY IT WORKS:

Children who struggle with emotional regulation often rely on predictable routines to feel safe. Maintaining these routines can reduce anxiety and prevent meltdowns.



Create a Safe Space for Breaks

TIP:

Set up a quiet retreat space at home or during events where your child can go to unwind if they become overwhelmed. Include comforting items like blankets or sensory toys.

WHY IT WORKS:

Giving your child a safe space to calm down can help them self-regulate and return to activities when they feel more settled.



Limit Screen Time to 1 Hour Per Day

TIP:

During the holiday break, it can be tempting to allow unlimited screentime, but it's recommended to keep it to a maximum of 1 hour per day.

WHY IT WORKS:

Excessive screentime can increase sensory overload and emotional dysregulation. Limiting screens gives children more time to engage in other activities that support their well-being, like exercise, creative play, or reading.



Incorporate 15 Minutes of Exercise Per Day

TIP:

Encourage at least 15 minutes of physical activity each day to help your child release energy and improve focus and mood.

WHY IT WORKS:

Physical activity is crucial for children, especially those who struggle with focus or emotional regulation. It provides a healthy outlet for energy, reduces stress, and improves overall well-being.



EXERCISE IDEAS:

- ❖ **Obstacle Course:** Use pillows, chairs, and other household items to create a simple obstacle course that challenges your child's coordination and balance.
- ❖ **Jump Rope:** A quick and fun way to get in some cardio. It's also a portable activity that can be used during holiday gatherings.
- ❖ **Animal Walks:** Have your child crawl like a bear, hop like a bunny, or slither like a snake. These movements engage both large and small muscle groups and are easy to do indoors.
- ❖ **Dance Party:** Play your child's favorite holiday songs and let them dance around the living room. This is a great way to burn energy and have fun together.
- ❖ **Yoga:** Simple yoga poses like the butterfly, tree, or downward dog can be calming and help with body awareness.
- ❖ **Family Relay Races:** Get out in the yard or a local park and complete relay races, getting the whole family involved.



Set Realistic Expectations for Socializing

TIP:

Avoid forcing your child to participate in social activities if they aren't ready. Allow them to observe or ease into social situations at their own pace.

WHY IT WORKS:

Children who struggle with social interactions may become overwhelmed by too many demands. Being patient and letting them warm up to socializing helps reduce pressure.



Simplify Gift-Giving

TIP:

Focus on sensory-friendly gifts that align with your child's needs, such as fidget toys, sensory kits, or calming devices like weighted blankets.

WHY IT WORKS:

Choosing gifts that support your child's sensory preferences can help them feel calm and regulated, minimizing stress over new or unfamiliar items.



Create a Sensory Kit for Holiday Gatherings

TIP:

Sensory triggers can arise unexpectedly, so having a calm-down kit ready can prevent meltdowns during holiday events. The kit should include sensory-friendly items to soothe your child when they feel overstimulated.

WHY IT WORKS:

By staying ahead of known sensory triggers, you can help your child regulate their response to overwhelming situations. Pack items such as:



- ♦ **Weighted Blanket:** Provides calming pressure and can help with sensory regulation.
- ♦ **Sensory Body Sock:** A stretchy garment that offers deep pressure and calming input.
- ♦ **Chewelry (Chewing Jewelry):** Safe, wearable items for children who need oral sensory input.
- ♦ **Noise-Canceling Headphones or Earplugs:** Reduces noise levels in loud environments.
- ♦ **Sunglasses:** Helps with sensitivity to bright lights.
- ♦ **Comfort Items:** A favorite toy, blanket, or stuffed animal to provide emotional security.
- ♦ **Fidget Toys:** Small objects that keep hands busy and reduce anxiety.
- ♦ **Snow Globe:** A visual calming tool.
- ♦ **Calming Essential Oils (Lavender):** Helps create a soothing atmosphere.
- ♦ **Bubbles or Jump Rope:** Physical activities that can help release energy in a fun way.
- ♦ **Healthy Snacks and Water:** Maintaining regular nourishment helps stabilize mood and energy levels.

This sensory kit can be a lifesaver during holiday shopping trips, visits with friends, or festive events. By having it readily available, you can feel more confident and prepared to manage any challenges that come up.



Practice Breathing and Calming Techniques

TIP:

Incorporate simple breathing exercises or calming techniques into your child's routine, especially before stressful events.

WHY IT WORKS:

Deep breathing and mindfulness exercises can help your child regulate emotions and remain calm in overwhelming situations.



Be Flexible with Holiday Plans

TIP:

Be open to adjusting your holiday plans if something becomes too overwhelming for your child. Prioritize your child's emotional health over sticking to a rigid schedule.

WHY IT WORKS:

Flexibility shows your child that their feelings are important, which helps reduce the pressure they may feel in unfamiliar situations.



Brain-Healthy Holiday Treats

As the holiday season approaches and our calendars fill up with festivities, it's essential to maintain a sense of balance in our diet. By focusing on incorporating healthy, high-fiber carbohydrates, lean proteins, and healthy fats into our meals and snacks, we can ensure we are nourishing our bodies with the essential macronutrients and micronutrients needed to support our immune systems and energy levels. This balanced approach not only helps regulate blood sugar levels, but also keeps our moods stable and energy levels steady throughout the busy holiday season.

BANANA & COCONUT SNOWMAN

A fun holiday treat that kids will love! Have a few extra bananas around? Cut each banana into slices. Use a pastry brush and lightly coat the tops with nonfat or low-fat plain, greek yogurt (a great source of protein). Sprinkle them with coconut for snow. You can stick some yogurt on the sides to help the rounds stick together. Add some chocolate chips for eyes and buttons and pop a berry on top for the hat. I use small pieces of dried cranberry/cherries or mangoes for the nose. Use some toothpicks or pretzel sticks for arms and there you go!



HOLIDAY BARK

Easy treat that can be adjusted based on the holiday!

- Take Low-Fat Plain Greek yogurt, spread out over parchment paper on a cookie sheet.
- Add whatever fun additives you enjoy! (Fruit + sugar free chocolate chips, Pumpkin puree with pumpkin spice, crushed peppermint, etc)

PEPPERMINT CHOCOLATE ENERGY BALLS

These energy balls are an excellent option for lunches, snacks on the go or even a cookie swap. They are packed with nutrition and if you'd like, you can also add a protein powder of your choice to increase the protein content. If you choose to do this, it is recommended to slightly increase the quantity of nut butter and/or add a splash of a dairy free milk alternative.

The combination of dates, oats, nut butter and dark chocolate creates a nutrient rich snack that supports brain health and overall wellness. Dates are rich in B vitamins that support energy levels, various antioxidants that can reduce inflammation, as well as key minerals and fiber to help with satiety. Dark chocolate is also rich in antioxidants as well as a key compound called phenylethylamine that has been shown to boost overall mood and improve cognitive function. Nut butters can vary a bit depending on what you choose, but overall contain beneficial monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats that have been shown to also improve cognitive function, memory and overall mood. The protein and fat in nut butter also helps to keep the snack balanced preventing a blood sugar crash. Oats are also rich in B vitamins to support energy levels, minerals that aid overall health and the fiber content benefits gut health and offers sustained energy as a complex carbohydrate source. Coating each energy ball in peppermint also offers additional benefits as studies have shown mint can help enhance memory and concentration, as well as reduce inflammation.



- 8 ounces dried pitted dates
- 2/3 cup rolled oats
- 1/2 cup nut butter of your choice
- 1 ½ ounces dark chocolate or Lily's no sugar added chocolate
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 4 Yum Earth candy canes

First, process dates, oats, nut butter, chocolate and salt in a food processor until well blended. Divide the mixture evenly into 16 balls, about 2 tablespoons each.

Next break candy canes into large pieces and place into the food processor. Process until finely chopped, about 1 minute. Transfer to a medium bowl and roll the balls into the candy cane pieces until evenly coated.

Tips: Keep in mind that those with Celiac disease or gluten sensitivity should choose oats labeled "gluten free." If you would like to make a batch ahead, you can store them in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 7 days.

HEALTHY HOLIDAY TOAST

Using the bread of your choice you can transform plain toast into fun holiday shapes! You can use a spread of your choice like a nut butter or mashed avocado as the base and then get creative with decorations. You can try using cookie cutters in shapes like candy canes, snowmen, etc and decorate with chopped veggies, fruit, shredded coconut and chocolate chips.

This snack provides a source of complex carbohydrates from the bread for sustained energy and additional fiber to support digestive health. When combined with a nut butter, mashed avocado or coconut butter this provides a nutrient rich, balanced snack that is very filling. Avocado, nut butters and coconut butter are all sources of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats that benefit brain health, and the addition of fruits and veggies will offer additional vitamins and fiber making this snack a festive and very balanced holiday treat.

To make use holiday cookie cutters in the shapes you'd like and cut out bread before toasting. Then get creative with toppings and include your child in the decoration process!

A few ideas:

- **Gingerbread man:** peanut butter and diced strawberries for the mouth, chocolate chips for the eyes and buttons.
- **Candy cane:** coconut butter and diced strawberries for stripes
- **Ornament:** mashed avocado and assorted veggies for decor, chunk of cucumber for top of ornament
- **Christmas Tree:** mashed avocado with pomegranates as ornaments

PB REINDEERS

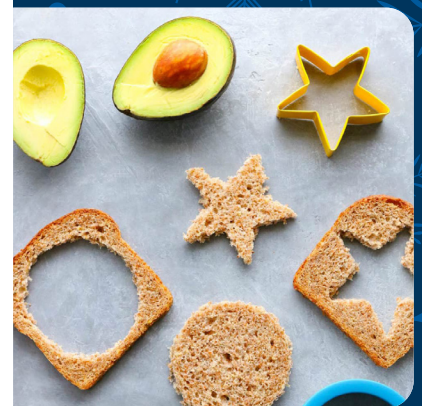
Slice a couple of celery stocks into thirds

All natural peanut butter (or any nut butter)

Dye-free candied eyeballs* or low sugar mini-chocolate chips

Handful of pretzels broken in thirds

Handful of raspberries



*To home make candied eyeballs, put a small round dollop of icing on some parchment paper and place a mini-chocolate chip in the center. Place in the refrigerator or freezer to harden. You can also simply use plain mini-chocolate chips for the eyes (without the icing).

The combination of a nut butter (protein and healthy fat) and the celery (carbohydrate with fiber) is a fantastic way to provide a boost of energy and keep you fuller longer ensuring a stable blood sugar and mood. Raspberries are also rich in fiber and provide great antioxidants to keep us healthy and the chocolate adds a touch of sweetness without providing much added sugar.

EXTRAS (TO PURCHASE TREATS)

Running out of time this Holiday Season? Pick up some special treats on the go!

- Skouts Organic Kids Snack Bars (Pumpkin Pie)
- That's It! Spooky Fruit Bites
- Yum Earth Organic Halloween Candies (no dyes, contains 9g added sugar /pack)
- Ghosts Peanut Butter White Chocolate (0 added sugar)
- Yum Earth Candy Cane Pops (4 g added sugar per pop)



The holidays don't have to be stressful or filled with meltdowns for families with children who struggle with sensory, emotional, or social challenges. By preparing ahead, maintaining consistent routines, incorporating daily exercise, and creating a calm-down sensory kit, you can help your child feel more secure and in control during the holiday season. Remember to be patient with both your child and yourself. With a little extra planning, your family can enjoy the magic of the holidays while minimizing stress and meltdowns.