

CFAS:

A guide to a Trauma-informed Christmas

Here at the **Centre for Fostering and Adoption Support**, we're aware that the run up to Christmas and all the time wrapped around the festive period can be a time of great excitement and overwhelm for children and their adoptive parents. This is made even harder if it's your first Christmas or you are relatively early into your adoption journey together.



So here are a few suggestions that might help you, as you plan to navigate this time period:

[Try to reduce expectations on both you and your child](#)

Easier said than done, we know! There is so much pressure on us all to make Christmas perfect and happy. It's in adverts, social media and every visit to any shop at this time of year!

In terms of your own lived experiences, your journey to becoming an adopter will have had its own unique set of experiences and challenges, meaning that once your child or children have finally moved in with you – it feels like there should be a huge celebration.

However, the reality is that for most people Christmas can be a trigger or reminder of people that are no longer present in your life. For care experienced children, Christmas will have its own memories, some of which may be positive but also sad or frightening too.

Christmas might heighten your child's feelings of loss, but they might not have the words or cognition yet to express how they are feeling. There may be anger, confusion or sadness at not seeing birth family members or they might feel guilty for having happy moments within their new adoptive family. Often these feelings and memories will be all jumbled up, so your child's behaviour might reflect this inner hurt or need.

For example, you might notice that in the run up to Christmas, that their behaviour might alter slightly. They might find it harder to regulate themselves and be more attention needing - seeking your touch and proximity or they may be tearful or angry, which is often a masking emotion which hides the fear and anxiety that lies underneath.

Having these feelings or them playing out in their behaviours is not them rejecting you, even though sometimes it might really feel like this, in the moment. It's about them trying to make sense of their new place and space in the world. So, being open with them and giving them space and reassurance that its ok to have these worries or feelings will help empathically model that you are trying to connect with and understand your child.

Using 'I wonder if' language, helps show your child that you are noticing them and trying to understand them and help them make connections and build security- Dan Siegel calls this 'name it to tame it.'

Giving reassurance and permission that its ok to miss people who can't be with your child at Christmas is also important. Using Holly van Guldens part language helps you to show a child that they can feel lots of feelings about Christmas all at once and this is ok. E.g. my happy part is loving having a cuddle with you and eating this chocolate cake, but my sad part is missing x...'



Overload of school and non-school events and activities in the run up to Christmas

Another part of the expectation placed on adopters comes from the overload of school and non-school events and activities in the run up to Christmas. This often means there are numerous parties, nativity performances, new or unexpected extras that might come onto the school/after school calendar. It might help to have some earlier discussions in the run up to December with your child's teacher to explain why your child might struggle with spontaneity or unplanned events, that wherever possible helping them to know what's happening each day will help reduce their anxiety levels.



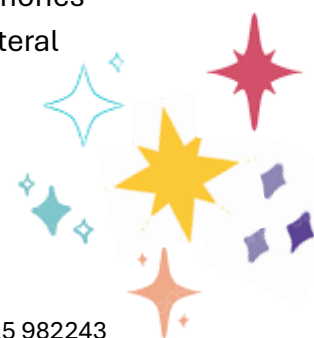
Expectation may also come from your loved ones, eager to celebrate and participate in your first family Christmas. Our suggestion would be to have these talks early, to mould expectation of what you think you and your child can handle. Low key, if possible, in their own home if you can, or if this isn't possible thinking about when to structure family and friend get togethers over the Christmas period, so its not just focused on the one day.

Its ok to say no, to try and do things a little differently whilst you are still all getting to know each other. It might be that family get togethers are shorter than usual-to ensure they are successful or might need be in more neutral spaces so there's chance for a run around at the beach or park so that some physical exertion may help release some of the build-up too.

Instead of a focus on Christmas day, move it to Christmas time language

This means you can start splitting the days into more coherent chunks for your child. The use of a visual timetable, language prompts with now, next and later will help, especially if you're navigating your first Christmas together, because it helps build predictability.

Remember, after your first Christmas you can start building language and a narrative for your child that builds permanence. For example, 'Chloe, I remember when we went to Granny's to watch the Christmas film last year, or ...we had hot chocolate and marshmallows after your nativity at school.' By naming and recalling these memories you are building up tangible links for your child by building a shared history, a literal memory jar of new family experiences, for your child.



Sensory needs at Christmas time

Let's move to thinking about the sensory needs of your child at this point too.

Often, at Christmas, children are expected to wear more party outfits or formal wear for school and family parties or Christmas day. We would recommend you letting your child wear clothes that are familiar, and they feel comfortable in, wherever possible.

Alternatively, trying out and trying on new party clothes ahead of time to see if they feel ok for your child might be helpful too.



There are lots of lights, smells and sounds that can be quite triggering for children at Christmas. If they don't like loud bangs, avoiding balloons and making your own crackers without the bang in them might help reduce stimuli that could frighten or overwhelm them.

Think about having a small, take with you everywhere little bag, with some fidget toys, sunglasses, ear defenders, a handkerchief with your perfume or scent, an attachment object, something they can hold or wrap themselves in, a colouring book or a favourite book, as well as some familiar snacks and a drink. This little bag could help if you notice that your child is starting to get overwhelmed in busy, noisy or crowded spaces.

Countdown to Christmas:

Another frequently asked question from our adopters is about managing the seemingly endless 'countdown to Christmas' for your children. It's important to remember that excitement is as dysregulating as fear. Be guided by how or what your child is saying and noticing about lights, decorations, presents etc., especially if they are a bit older. Also asking them what rituals and things they like doing for Christmas could become part of your new shared family rituals together, moving forward.

Depending on the needs of your children, we often find that having a shorter count down to Christmas within your home can really help. For example, planning to reduce the length of time the decorations go up, or having shared spaces and private places, i.e. the child's bedroom, where they may be Christmas free zones, will give them space to breathe and have a little respite from the constant reminder of Christmas.



Some families opt to slowly build up the decorations in a room or space, one room at a time. And, at the other side of Christmas, you might need to take your decorations down a little earlier, or in phases. Remember its early days for you, so you will be learning from and about each other with every year that passes.

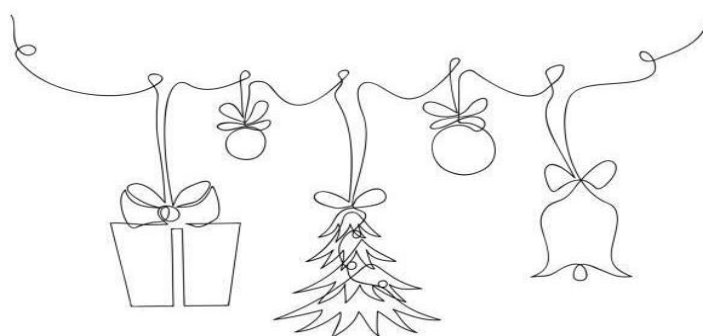
Another thing to begin thinking about is what is your messaging about Father Christmas (and in some cases, elf on the shelf) is going to be. What is hard with these ideas is that they are often linked to punishments or rewards for being good or naughty. For care experienced children they will often, due to their adverse early experiences, already have quite negative self-esteem and quickly tip into toxic shame.

Christmas Day:

In terms of thinking about sensory needs on Christmas day itself, we would suggest either agreeing in advance with your child (depending on their age of course) what the children might eat. Wherever possible, can they stick to foods that are familiar and favourites? Keeping mealtimes to what they are used to, help keep a little structure and predictability in place for them.



Concepts like Father Christmas, although traditional for some of our families, have lots of tricky connotations for care experienced children who may have experienced abuse, issues with secrecy and witnessed or experienced really challenging things around the Christmas period. This messaging may take a few years to grow and develop in an organic and comfortable way for you, but it might be that you think about having the presents left at a point furthest away from the children's room, or even in the garage (if it's secure)- and naming where the presents might be left by Santa, with your child (this might be included on the letter to Santa) so that they know that he will not be entering their private space, e.g. their bedroom.



Christmas gifts:


You may also want to consider the number of presents you give your child or allow friends or family to give. Too many gifts will tip your child into overwhelm quickly. Family might be able to give vouchers so you can have time in future months building memories together on fun family days out instead. We would recommend a 'less is more' approach, if you can and just have a few presents.

You could also potentially stagger when the child receives them, so that they get presents both before Christmas day and after, to reduce the anxiety and having to wait, and the chaos of present unwrapping! You might also decide that if there is a must have toy that your child desperately wants, that you think about giving this to your child before Christmas day, to reduce their worry that they may not be getting any presents.

Christmas is a time when you will be so focused on trying to make it the best it can be for your child, that you forget how important you are in this equation- both you and your child will really need some in-built down times in your calendar over Christmas. We recommend some pyjama days so that you can all have some much-needed decompression time after visitors or family and friend outings. Sometimes letting your child watch a programme or film or have a little time on their tablet so you can have a cuppa or do some things you need to do, is ok and sometimes very necessary!

Any chance to draw on your support network and let them help you, with practical and/or emotional support at this busy and potentially stressful time is key to making Christmas pass for you and your child in the best way possible.





Finally, the adoption journey really is a marathon
not a sprint.

Please try to remember that this is just the
beginning of establishing your own unique
family rituals and traditions for Christmas, together.

You will get there!

You will learn with each Christmas, what works and
what doesn't work for you and your child and build
positive foundations on this learning together.

We wish you a very happy Christmas!



Merry Christmas



RESOURCES:



Sensory Integration Education website:

- [Managing Christmas Sensory Challenges](#)
- [Sensory Integration Education News and Blog](#)

Beacon House resources:



Out with the Old - In
with the New.pdf



The Christmas
Storm.pdf



PACE at
Christmas.pdf

A Sensory Christmas

*Strategies and advice from a
member of the CFAS
Occupational Therapy team*



A Sensory
Christmas.pdf

The Very Wobbly Christmas: [Link to YouTube video](#)

A Story to Help Children Who Feels Anxious about Christmas – Book by Rosie Jefferies and Sarah Naish

Other resources:

- [It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year? - The Child Psychology Service](#)
- [Navigating the Christmas Party season | Adoption UK Charity](#)
- [Top Tips for helping your Adopted Child through the Xmas period - Adoption Mid and West Wales](#)
- [My Christmas Survival Plan - tips from an adoptive Mum - First4Adoption](#)