



Christmas for Children and Young People who have experienced trauma.

Resources for Parents and Schools

Christmas is coming and for most children, young people and their families, this creates feelings of excitement and joyful anticipation as they recall their memories of Christmas past; family coming together, the magic, the surprise, the gifts, the food.... Unfortunately, Christmas isn't like that for everyone.

Children and young people with developmental trauma may recall Christmas as the time when the adults around them, who perhaps were always unpredictable, frightening and abusive, become even more so - for these children and young people, Christmas may be anticipated with terror.

(Acord Education and Care, 2020)

With thanks to Kent Virtual School, with support from Bexley and Medway Virtual Schools, for the production of this information leaflet.



Research

Fundamental to supporting children and young people with developmental trauma is establishing a sense of safety.

Critical to this is known carers providing reliable, predictable daily routines and boundaries, a consistency of communication and response and clarity of expectations within containing and sensory balanced environments.

Christmas however, often means a complete change in the norm—the environment is decorated, the lighting is different, bedtimes and getting up times may vary, the bedtime routine may be different in preparation for Santa, meal times may happen at different times, there may be unknown visitors, secret whispers and hiding, lots of surprises, loud noises, singing and nativity practise, unstructured timetables and references to sought-after gifts.

It would seem then, at a time when a traumatised child or young person is in most need of feeling safe, a time when they are anticipating terror, everything that may bring that sense of safety, changes.

(Acorn Education, 2020)

For those children who do not celebrate Christmas, it can still be a time of difficulty. Lack of familiar routines at school, feeling confused and not feeling included can all lead to increased anxiety and a lack of feeling safe.

Research shows that children and young people with developmental trauma are hypersensitive to danger and are thrown back into their primitive drive for survival, adopt states of 'Flight/Flight/Freeze' and within these present with many behaviours:

- * Not focused
- * Not listening
- * Clumsy
- * Daydreaming
- * Aggressive
- * Disruptive / loud
- * Hyperactive
- * Running away / hiding
- * Silly voices
- * Controlling

(Bowlby, 1969)

Strategies for Home

Try to make Christmas a predictable, planned event:

- * Talk about Christmas beforehand. Explore fears and hopes. Think about coping strategies.
- * Involve the children in the planning, allow them to have some control over the events.
- * Prepare a schedule for Christmas— who is around, what will happen and when.
- * Use the advent calendar as the countdown and schedule of events.
- * Prepare your children ready for the next school term— what will they be learning, why the classroom will look different (the decorations will be put away before they are at home, displays will change etc).

Keep to the house routines:

- * Try to maintain the daily routines; particularly the child or young person's individualised routines for getting up, washing, dressing, bedtimes and meal times, even Christmas dinner.

Keep to the house rules:

- * Stick to the house or individual rules about time on social media or gaming consoles.
- * Maintain the usual boundaries and behavioural expectations.

Provide opportunities for emotional regulation:

- * Build in quiet times to the festive days, after each exciting point providing time to calm, regulate and touch base.
- * Make time to get some fresh air or take some physical exercise.
- * Be thoughtful about noise levels, allocating a 'quiet room' where noisy games and activities are kept away from.

Routines and Structure:

(Beacon House, 2021)

- * Do more of what works (rather than less): Children may need more of your presence, more supervision, more scaffolding and more support than usual. How can time for this be built in? How can you build up your emotional reserves to give you the energy you need?
- * KNOWLEDGE is empowerment: Making the Christmas schedule explicit and predictable lowers stress for all. Draw it out, write it out, repeat it lots, keep as much as you can as the same as usual. Share the timetable with parents who can support their children with their daily routines.
- * Provide opportunities for emotional regulation: Build in quiet times to the festive days, after each exciting point providing time to calm, regulate and touch base.

Zones of Regulation and Emotional Check-ins:

- * EXPLORE the anticipation of Christmas: “Christmas is coming, what’s that like for you?” “Where do you think you are today?”
- * EXCITEMENT is just the other side of the coin: Anticipate that excitement can often feel the same as stress for traumatised children. It’s okay to keep things low key and by reducing excitement you are reducing stress.
- * CONNECT then REFLECT: “I can have a hard time when Christmas is over too—especially when I was a kid.... Here’s what we could do together to get back into a routine we enjoy...”

Naughty or Nice list:

- * Help the child to know that giving and receiving presents is not dependent on them being good. They are loved and worthy regardless of their behaviour. Similarly, you are thinking of them over the break, perhaps give them some colouring to bring back in January that you are very much looking forward to seeing!
- * Elf Cams and Santa’s watching—be mindful that this can be stressful for children who feel shame and rejection.

Resources

Useful Websites:

[Issue-4-Christmas.pdf \(acorneducationandcare.co.uk\)](https://www.acorneducationandcare.co.uk/Issue-4-Christmas.pdf)

[Coping with Christmas | Adoption UK Charity](https://www.adoptionukcharity.org.uk/coping-with-christmas)

[5 Ways To Have A Trauma Informed Christmas - Lisa Cherry](https://www.lisa-cherry.com/5-ways-to-have-a-trauma-informed-christmas)

[Xmas storm \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/2017/12/15/xmas-storm/)

[PACE at Christmas \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/2017/12/15/pace-at-christmas/)

[Surviving Christmas with Trauma - The Trauma Practice](https://www.traumapractice.com/surviving-christmas-with-trauma)

[Surviving the Holidays with C-PTSD / DID — Beauty After Bruises](https://www.beautyafterbruises.com/surviving-the-holidays-with-c-ptsd-did)

[50+ Christmas Crafts for Kids - The Best Ideas for Kids](https://www.thebestideasforkids.com/50-christmas-crafts-for-kids)

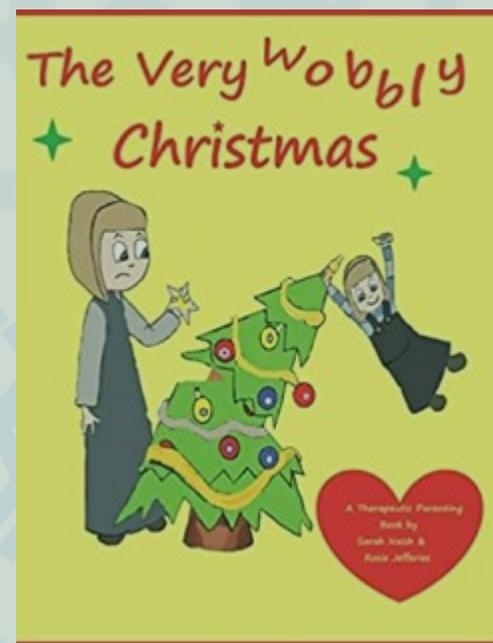
[Christmas Sensory Survival Kit \(sensoryintegrationeducation.com\)](https://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/christmas-sensory-survival-kit)

[Sensory Gift Guide for All Ages \(sensoryintegrationeducation.com\)](https://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/sensory-gift-guide-for-all-ages)

Books:

[11 Christmas Books For Adoptive Families | Adoption.com](https://www.adoption.com/11-christmas-books-for-adoptive-families)

[The Very Wobbly Christmas: A story to help children who feel anxious about Christmas: Amazon.co.uk: Naish, Sarah, Jefferies, Rosie: 9781726626729: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B078172662)



Beacon House Resources

SUPPORTING TRAUMATISED CHILDREN THROUGH THE CHRISTMAS STORM

Based on ideas from Dan Hughes, with thanks to Helen Cruikshanks

Christmas is coming and we each bring our own sledge load of past experiences, expectations, internal and external pressures. Here are some top tips for how to survive and thrive in the Christmas Storm:



CHRISTMAS WISDOM FOR THE ADULTS

Your OWN big feelings: It is ok to prioritise your own regulation. If you feel broken, rage or despair then your child will feel it too. The first Christmas job is to regulate yourself.

OWNING your feelings: By acknowledging your own feelings towards Christmas, you can start to see how they might impact your empathy and connection with others.

CO-CREATING your own Christmas: Christmas brings huge changes in routine and expectation. It is ok if you avoid or adapt certain Christmassy rituals. By doing this you are supporting your child to feel successful by not having the experience of 'failing at Christmas'.

Invite your **SUPPORT NETWORK** to help: It's okay to know that you can't do it all alone. Ask your supportive friends, family or colleagues to help co-create a Christmas that is right for you and your child.

DYSREGULATION IS STRESSFUL

STRESS (OVERWHELMING FEELINGS E.G. EXCITEMENT, ANGER) LEADS TO DYSREGULATION

EXCITEMENT is just the other side of the coin: Anticipate that excitement can often feel the same as stress for traumatised children. It's okay to keep things low key and by reducing excitement you are reducing stress

Beacon House Therapeutic Services & Trauma Team (2021) www.beaconhouse.org.uk

CREATING CHRISTMAS CONNECTION, PREDICTABILITY & CURIOSITY

KNOWLEDGE is empowerment: Making the Christmas schedule explicit and predictable lowers stress for all. Draw it out, write it out, repeat it lots, keep as much as you can the same as usual.

DO MORE of what works (rather than less). Your child needs more of your presence, more supervision, more scaffolding and more support than usual. How can time for this be built in? How can you build up your emotional reserves to give you the energy you need?

DO ACTIVITIES together: Create a Christmas culture of connecting, playing, making, baking. Consider what would be 'just the right' level of connection.

EXPLORE the anticipation of Christmas: "Christmas is coming, what's that like for you?" "Everyone experiences Christmas differently, from being happy and excited through to finding it really difficult. Where do you think you are today?"

UNDERSTAND their Christmas past: Be curious - "What did you used to do at Christmas that you enjoyed? What would you like to keep doing each Christmas? What would you like to lose? What would make it just right for you?"

LETTING go of 'should' s': Let go of expectations for yourself or your child about what Christmas should be like or feel like. It is what it is for you and your child in that moment. That is more than okay.

DISCOVERING the worries: Be curious and empathic towards your child's memories, questions, feelings, guilt or shame about their birth family. Explore - "how does it feel for you to enjoy Christmas? Is there a part of you that feels bad? How does it feel to know that this is so normal and you can both feel bad and enjoy it?"

Beacon House Therapeutic Services & Trauma Team (2021) www.beaconhouse.org.uk

GIVING AND RECEIVING AT CHRISTMAS

The **DILEMMA** of presents: Past deprivation may make both giving and receiving presents a trigger for shame, guilt or fear. Be a model for your child: help them see the joy people experience from the thinking, planning, making, giving and receiving of presents.

FORGET THE NAUGHTY OR NICE LIST! Help your child to know that giving and receiving presents is NOT dependent on them being good. They are loved and worthy of gifts in your family regardless of their behaviour.

Keep presents **LOW KEY**: Too many or very expensive gifts can be overwhelming and 'too much', leaving your child with an urge to reject or break things to regulate their feelings. Titrate your gifts, make them bite-size, tolerable, acceptable.

PARENT / CARER

"I should have known better"

"I didn't get it right, I'm dreading next year"

"That was a waste of time and money"

CHILD

"It's my fault, I didn't enjoy it"

"I'll NEVER BE THAT FUN AGAIN"

"I feel so guilty because I should have enjoyed it but I don't"

WATCH OUT FOR THE POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES

WHY NOT TRY...

INCREASING familiar structure and supervision: Helping them get back into the momentum of 'normal' life by increasing structure and supervision. Use your presence to help them get back to previous habits and predictable routines.

CONNECT then reflect: "I can have a hard time when Christmas is over too - especially when I was a kid...here's what we could do together to get back into a routine we enjoy"

Beacon House Therapeutic Services & Trauma Team (2021) www.beaconhouse.org.uk

Beacon House is passionate about developing freely available resources so that knowledge about the repair of trauma and adversity is in the hands of those who need it.

Please visit their website for the whole range of resources available:

[Resources \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](http://Resources.beaconhouse.org.uk)

The Power of PACE at Christmas Time

There are a lot of feelings flying around at Christmas time for children and adults alike. Finding the right balance for YOU is something to work towards. PACE can help. PACE - Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy.



Playfulness isn't the same as playing but is enjoying time with someone else or yourself in an unconditional way.

This can look like a 5 minute sofa snuggle with someone, walking hand in hand, swapping cringy cracker jokes or even taking yourself off for a cry on your own if that's where you're at and trying to leave behind any guilt about it.

It's about showing a real interest in someone, or yourself, and finding something you really enjoy about them - or you. Even if that's 2 minutes alone with yourself outside the front door!

Acceptance means sitting with strong emotions or perspective of another and knowing that you might not be able to take these away. There may be no words of advice to give, strategies to implement or thoughts to share, only comfort by offering your safe presence.

It is allowing uncomfortable sensations and emotions to be in your own body without judgement. Accepting their existence.

For an example of this and Empathy, watch the YouTube clip called 'Brene Brown on Empathy' or find inspiration from the song 'Hold Space' by Ward Thomas.

Curiosity isn't about asking "why?" even when this is exactly what we want to know! It's about wondering what is going on inside for someone or oneself.

It's about taking the risk of being wrong "Can I share my ideas with you... I wonder if... I might be wrong, so tell me if I am, but here are my thoughts..."

A way of letting someone know that your mind is on their mind and genuinely interested in anything at all that's going on in there without judgement.

It is practising this same non-judgemental curiosity within ourselves.

Empathy can take a lot of energy at Christmas. Sitting with the disappointment of a child who hasn't got the gift they hoped for "I can see the sadness in your eyes that it's not what you wanted," or accepting our own disappointment that the time hasn't felt very festive "I am where I am and things are how they are and I'm going to do my best to feel okay with that".

A top tip is try to move away from reassurance or denial of feelings - others or your own. Naming what is happening for ourselves or another helps us in our offering of empathy.

To PACE oneself: "To do something at a speed that is steady and that allows one to continue without becoming too tired."

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Virtual Schools

A Virtual School acts as a local authority champion to promote the progress and educational attainment of children and young people who are or who have been in care and those who have had social services involvement, so that they achieve educational outcomes comparable to their peers. Ensuring that they receive a high-quality education is the foundation for improving their lives.

For advice on education please contact the Virtual School in the local authority where your young person attends their education setting:

Bexley Virtual School:

Email: vsb@bexley.gov.uk

Website: [Virtual School For Looked After and Previously Looked After Children | Bexley Local Offer](#)



Medway Virtual School:

Email: virtualschool@medway.gov.uk

Website: [Medway's Virtual School | Education of looked-after children | Medway Council](#)



Virtual School Kent:

Email: VSKPLAC@Kent.gov.uk or VSKAdvisoryTeam@kent.gov.uk

Referral form for advice: [Request advice for previously looked after children - Privacy notice - Return to Kent.gov.uk \(achieveservice.com\)](#)

Website: [Welcome to the Virtual School Kent Website:Virtual School Kent \(lea.kent.sch.uk\)](#)



Adoption Partnership South East

Adoption Partnership South East is the regional adoption agency, delivering adoption services for the London Borough of Bexley, Kent County Council and Medway Council.

They support parents with every step of their adoption journey, from your first thoughts about adoption, the application process and one parents have adopted. Bringing together expertise, they are committed to achieving the best for all our children across the region.

For advice, support and information on adoption services, including development and training:

Advice line: 03000 422373

Email: adoption.Partnership@kent.gov.uk

General Enquiries: 03000 420508 to speak to a member of the team about your enquiry.

Facebook: [Adoption Partnership South East | Maidstone | Facebook](#)



We would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a fun, calm and nurturing Christmas and New Year.

