

# SUPPORTING TRAUMATISED CHILDREN THROUGH THE CHRISTMAS STORM

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

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:



**Beacon House**  
Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team

**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 you and your child.



DYSREGULATION  
IS STRESSFUL

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

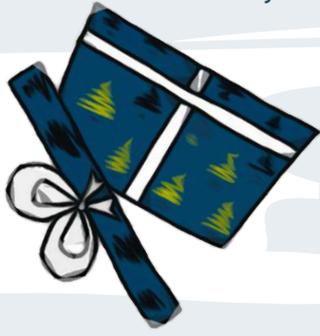
**EXCITEMENT** is just the other side of the coin: Anticipate that excitement can often feel the same as stress for traumatised children. It's okay to keep things low key and by reducing excitement you are reducing stress



**CREATING CHRISTMAS  
SAFETY THROUGH 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.

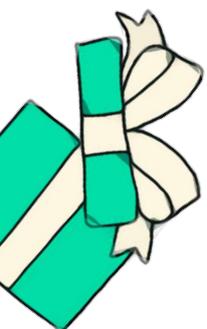
**EXPLORE** the anticipation of Christmas: "Christmas is coming, what's that like for you?" "Everyone experiences Christmas differently, from being happy and excited through to finding it really difficult. Where do you think you are today?"



**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?"

# 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 dependant 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**



## WATCH OUT FOR THE POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES

"I should have known better"

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

**CHILD**

"IT WILL NEVER BE THAT FUN AGAIN"

"That was a waste of time and money"

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

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

## 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"