



The Welcoming Table *Holiday*

Dinner games, activities, and advice to make holiday meals comfortable for neurodivergent family members



Set the tone: Help your extended family plan for success!

Talk to family and friends ahead of time. Set expectations, have a plan for your child's comfort, and ask for support if you need it!

"We all have likes and dislikes! John doesn't like crunchy foods. What's something you don't like?"

"Her body is sensitive to things that might not bother your body. Thank you for being so patient and gentle!"

"Sometimes things seem extra loud to Brayden. He might cover his ears or hum. If that happens, we might want to lower our voices."

"She's working on trying new foods in therapy, but today, we're going to let her enjoy what she likes. It's okay if it's different from what everyone else is eating."

"Tyra will join us at the table for 10 minutes, then she's going to go have some quiet time alone. She'll be back to join us for dessert!"

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Make the dinner table sensory-friendly

If your child has sensory needs, it's a good idea to make their spot at the holiday table comfortable for them!

Help fidgety kids get the wiggles out with a pre-dinner dance party or other active game

If wobble cushions, chair bands, or weighted lap pads work well at home, make sure to bring them along for the holidays

Let your child use a stress ball or fidget object during the meal, or give break times so kids can move and stim as needed

Allow your child to use noise-cancelling headphones or wear earbuds to play their own calming music if necessary

Offer "safe" foods if the menu is challenging, and seat your child on an end so they can take breaks from smells as needed

3

Try these activities for movement breaks during the meal!



DINNER GAMES WAITER, WAITER!

- The Waiter, Waiter! game helps give short breaks from sitting at the table. You'll need a way to keep track of time and/or signal that it's time for the "waiter." Use an alarm on a phone, or keep a bell or buzzer on the table.
- At intervals throughout your meal, ring the bell to signal that it's time for your child to get ready to help.
- When the bell or alarm has sounded, cry "Waiter, Waiter!" Then follow it up with a request for help that allows the child to leave the table to complete a task. For example:
 - "Waiter, waiter! Please bring more water to the table!"
 - "Waiter, waiter! We need more napkins, please!"
 - "Waiter, waiter! I spilled some sauce. Can you please bring a rag?"
 - "Waiter, waiter! Please bring us some ketchup!"
- Once your child has completed the task, make sure to say a big thank you before they sit back down.



3

Try these activities for movement breaks during the meal!



DINNER GAMES X MARKS THE SPOT

- The first rule is for the family adults to get rid of the idea that everyone has to sit at the table.
- Once you've decided that some family members can choose to stand at mealtimes, to help with their motor needs, it's time to start marking spots!
- We recommend using colored painter's tape to mark your spots. You can vary this idea by placing small yoga mats, area rugs, or even a hula hoop.
- Place a large "X" or create a box or circle on the floor where your child may stand during mealtimes. Make it large enough for them to be able to fidget, wiggle, bounce, and get their energy out — but small enough that they'll stay near the table and not bump into others.
- Once you've marked the space, introduce the idea to your child. Let them know they may sit if they wish, or if they feel the need to move around during mealtimes, they can move their chair away and use their marked spot instead.



3

Try these activities for movement breaks during the meal!



DINNER GAMES COOKIE FACE RACE

This hilarious cookie face race challenge doesn't have to be played with cookies — any flat-bottomed food item, like crackers, bread, slices of cheese or dried fruit strips, can work!

Each player tips his or her head back. Place a cookie (or other chosen food item) on each person's forehead. Set a timer for one minute and say "On your mark, get set, go!" See who can get the cookie from their forehead to their mouth first — but no hands! Players can only use their facial muscles to move their cookies.



4

Use these activities to help "cool down" and regulate



DINNER GAMES

5,4,3,2,1 ACTIVITY

Each family member takes turns naming:

- 5 things they can see
- 4 things they can touch
- 3 things they can hear
- 2 things they can smell
- 1 thing they can taste OR 1 thing they'd like to eat right now

For an extra boost of calm, try encouraging family members to take one slow, deep breath before sharing; speaking in a whisper; or sitting as still as possible while they share.



4

Use these activities to help "cool down" and regulate



DINNER GAMES DRAWING MUSIC

- Give each person a piece of paper and some colored pencils or crayons.
- Play a piece of music — preferably one that everyone enjoys!
- Challenge each person to draw along with the music, without lifting the crayon or pencil from the paper. The goal is to watch your own hands flow along with the music.
- When the music ends, stop drawing and share your creations. Notice how they're similar and how they're different!



4

Use these activities to help "cool down" and regulate



DINNER GAMES

Humming Bee Breathing

- Take turns closing your eyes and plugging your ears
- Inhale through your nose, and quietly hum an "mmm" sound as you exhale, trying to sound like a humming bee.
- Feel the vibrations in your head! Try placing your hands gently on the places where the vibrations are strongest.
- When one person is done with their humming exhale, they can open their eyes and offer the next turn to someone else.
- See what happens when you try humming different tones. Go higher or lower. Do the vibrations change? What else is different?
- After each person has had a few turns, talk about your humming bee breaths. Which sounds and exhales were the most calming?





Use these activities to help kids explore the holiday foods!



DINNER GAMES FOOD DETECTIVE

- Set up a “detective’s office” area. You’ll need a place to set out the food, plus lots of different “tools” your detective will use to help investigate.
- Ask your detective to investigate the food you’ve chosen and record their answers to the following questions (or any others you might think of!):
 - What color is the food?
 - How big is it, and/or how much does it weigh?
 - What does it feel like to touch this food? Is it smooth, rough, squishy, dry, wet...?
 - Does it have a smell? Can you describe it?
 - Try to push this food across the table to the other end. Measure how far it goes.
- Now add an extra challenge for your detective! Ask them to share their notes and findings with another family member who wasn’t present for the activity. Can the other person guess what food they were investigating just by reading the notes?





Use these activities to help kids explore the holiday foods!



DINNER GAMES BLINDFOLDED SMELL TEST

Set up small jars with cinnamon, lemon, toothpaste, banana, other spices in your kitchen, yogurt and/or whatever else you have on hand.

Blindfold your family members and have them guess the ingredients!



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Use these activities to help kids explore the holiday foods!



DINNER GAMES

MAKE WHIPPED CREAM

If you like the idea of making something out of nothing, then you'll enjoy this recipe.

Place whipping cream in a tightly covered container (test the tightness of the lid first, to prevent wardrobe disasters). Then, you shake the daylight's out of it. You can put on music and dance with it. Pass it from person to person and do the hokey pokey if you like!

When you're done, the cream thickens to become whipped cream. Save it for dessert...if you can resist.





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Get more expert advice on making mealtimes comfortable for family members with unique sensory, behavioral, emotional, and communication needs at:

TheFamilyDinnerProject.org/Welcoming-Table