



Tips for a
happy holiday,
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Welcome

It is sometimes difficult to find a trustworthy source for answers to complex questions about your child's health and development, so we provide this newsletter to bring you up-to-date information from specialists and researchers at Children's Hospital Los Angeles. For more information about the clinic or if you have a question about your child's development, please call the Autism Warm Line at 323-361-6102.

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To make an appointment, call the Autism Warm Line at 323.361.6102, email BooneFetterClinic@chla.usc.edu or visit CHLA.org/AUTISM.

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Holiday Tips from the Autism Parent Advisory Board

Holiday Season

The holiday season is a joyful time of the year, but it also can be stressful for parents. Preparing and planning early can help you avoid some of the holiday stress. Creating a visual story (a series of pictures or drawings) before each holiday can help your child prepare for the day's activities. Here are some additional ideas to help you and your child enjoy the season.

Holiday Meals

- Prepare for holiday meals by practicing sitting at the table with the plates, lighting, music, etc., before the event. Make it fun.
- Prepare your child's favorite foods and snacks in case he or she doesn't like the holiday meal. If you are going to another home, take your child's favorite foods, music and snacks.
- Schedule an early dinner if you think the menu might be a problem.
- Try out foods in advance to determine what your child does or does not like, and help him or her become more comfortable with the food selection.

Gatherings

- Know your setting. You may have to prepare another area where your child can play or a space to decompress if he or she is overwhelmed by the sensory stimulation. Try to get a few other children or adults to join your child.
- Think about your family traditions and your child's sensory/behavioral profile and how your child will interact.
- Prepare an activity for your child if you know he or she will have an aversion to a holiday tradition. For example, some families watch football on Thanksgiving with surround sound and high volume. Your child may have an aversion to loud noises. Be prepared to take your child outside to play, or have the children play games in another room.

- Talk to your occupational therapist to make recommendations on how to work up to tolerating noise.
- Reward your child throughout the event and reinforce positive behaviors.
- Use ABA and floor-time techniques—"First we will do this, second we will do this," etc.
- Keep your eye on your child for signs of anxiety or distress. If your child is very active, take him or her to the park or a place to freely move, to help calm down.
- Practice any expected behaviors in advance.

Decorations

- Take your child to a small store so he or she can look at lights prior to setting up your tree. Some things to think about:
 - Is your child fixated on lights?
 - Does your child have an aversion to lights? If so, think of alternatives to having lights on your tree.
 - Have an alternative if your child likes to eat pine needles on the tree.
 - Is your child allergic to pine?

- Are you OK with an artificial tree?
- Do you have glass ornaments? Is your child safe with these? If not, what about plastic?
- Take great care to be sensitive to your children's sensory issues.
- Assign tasks that you feel your child can manage, so her or she can participate on some level.
- Make a calendar so your child knows when the tree is coming and when it will be taken down.

Gifts

- Does your child have the fine motor skills needed to open gifts? If not, start practicing early in the year. Have your child wrap little fun objects and open them.
- Some children might not recognize everyone's name; so put pictures on the gifts instead of names.
- Count down when the gifts will be opened. Consider hiding them until Christmas Day.



Research Highlights: A New View on Autism



Mark Borchert, MD, is an expert in eye birth defects and eye technology.

Researchers at Children's Hospital Los Angeles are focused on developing new diagnostic tools for children who have both developmental and visual challenges. Optic nerve hypoplasia (ONH) is a visual impairment often associated with developmental delay and autism spectrum disorders (ASDs).

Mark Borchert, MD, an eye specialist at Children's Hospital, estimates that nearly a third of children with ONH also have an ASD. Many behaviors in visually impaired children resemble ASD symptoms—such as repetitive speech, pronoun reversal, singsong language and ritualistic movements. Often these behaviors are termed "blindisms" and

attributed solely to diminished sight. Complicating the diagnosis is the fact that many screening methods for autism rely on visual cues such as making eye contact—problematic for children with poor vision.

Borchert's solution: a diagnostic tool that doesn't depend on a child's ability to see. The study team has modified existing instruments that screen for autism to eliminate vision-dependent tests. This included replacing small toys with larger or lighted toys, as well as finding non visual responses, such as turning toward a person's voice instead of pointing.

So far, the modified test has proven effective in predicting ASD in a small number of children with ONH. The next step is to enlarge the study. This innovative new strategy will help children receive a diagnosis sooner and enable them to get the care that they need. Borchert is working toward that goal. "It will make a huge difference in the lives of all children, including those with a visual impairment," he says.

Autism Genetics Expert Joins Research Team at Children's Hospital Los Angeles

Autism spectrum disorders are likely caused by both genetic and environmental factors. Research has shown that children's development is largely determined by their genes, but that their surroundings and experiences can change how they grow and develop. These complex influences also determine how the brain itself develops over time, and for some children may lead to developmental disorders such as autism. However, there are still many questions about how this process works.

A well-known expert in neurodevelopmental disorders, Pat Leviitt, PhD, recently joined Children's Hospital Los Angeles and the Institute for the Developing Mind to help answer these questions. Leviitt's groundbreaking research is uncovering the complex interactions between genes and the environment, and how they influence a child's brain functions, behaviors and abilities. His work will help health care providers identify autism earlier and intervene to improve the quality of life of children and families affected by the disorder.

"If we can identify the genetic factors that lead to autism and the other co-occurring health challenges a child has, we can create targeted therapies to intervene in the most effective way," Leviitt says.

Throughout his career, Leviitt has provided leadership to numerous committees and boards, including his current membership on the research advisory board for the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network. He is a frequent lecturer on autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders at the local, national and international level.

Autism Community Events



Autism Parent Advisory Board member Kameena Ballard-Dawkins (left) and Michele Kipke, PhD, at the Sunset Soiree

Everyone benefits from being part of a community, and Children's Hospital Los Angeles is proud to be part of the autism community in Los Angeles. This past spring and summer, through our partnership with the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network and the Autism Speaks Southern California Chapter, we've participated in some great events to promote autism awareness and the importance of early screening and identification.

- **Autism Awareness Month and Light It Up Blue!** Staff from clinics and offices throughout Children's Hospital Los Angeles showed their support for autism awareness on April 1, 2013, by wearing blue to work and discussing with co-workers, friends and families the importance of knowing the warning signs of autism and getting a developmental screening early if there are concerns.

- **Walk Now for Autism Speaks:** Led by members of our Autism Parent Advisory Board, we walked to show our support for Autism Speaks in this amazing event on April 20, 2013, at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, alongside thousands of families affected by autism spectrum disorders.
- **Over the Edge for Autism Speaks:** Aaron Tanner, speech pathologist in the Boone Fetter Clinic, along with other leaders in the autism community, went "Over the Edge" on July 27, 2013, fearlessly rappelling off the 11-story Renaissance Los Angeles Airport Hotel. For Tanner, this event was an opportunity to emphasize the importance of communication about ASDs.

- **Autism Speaks Sunset Soiree:** Aug. 21, 2013, we co-hosted a networking event with Autism Speaks for health care providers and community leaders from throughout Los Angeles who work with children with autism spectrum disorders. The event was an opportunity to celebrate three years of partnership through the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network and our organizations' collective efforts to improve the lives of families impacted by autism.
- **Early Screening Event:** A group of dedicated clinicians from Children's Hospital Los Angeles teamed up with Autism Speaks to provide free developmental screenings to families from throughout Los Angeles on Sept. 9, 2013. More than 90 families and 200 children attended the event at Magnolia Place.

Autism Warm Phone Line: 323.361.6102