

Holiday Guest Guide

by Rachel Nemhauser

For many of us raising children with disabilities, welcoming people into our homes around the holidays can be stressful. In preparation for our most welcomed and highly anticipated visitors, the following are some tips for visiting our family.

Focus on achievements, not deficits.

You will definitely notice inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors. Keep in mind though, that for every “bad” behavior you see, there are other skills we’ve been tirelessly chipping away at, like our child’s growing vocabulary and saying *please* and *thank you*. We hope you notice and celebrate all the things he does well.

Be patient.

Go slow. Start with a wave from across the room, or maybe a high-five. Give lots of chances to engage with you. Be interested in the things our child loves—toys, room, favorite TV show, games.

Don’t take it personally.

Our child will probably tell you to leave, and maybe even to shut up. He might turn his back on you and refuse to acknowledge your presence. Please, please, please don’t feel hurt. He isn’t trying to hurt your feelings. He is just expressing his discomfort in the only way he knows how.

Ask questions.

We’d love to tell you what we’re working on, which methods we’ve found helpful (and which ones aren’t), and our thoughts about our child’s future. In fact, he’s one of our favorite topics.

Give siblings all the attention they deserve.

While our child’s antics can take up more than his share of the attention, remember that his brother is here and deserves the spotlight too. He’s quieter about it, and will probably not color on any walls or wet his pants, but he needs and deserves to have his family show equal interest in his goals, challenges and plans for the future. He is an incredible kid.

Watch how we interact, and do what we do.

We know when to be firm, when to use distraction, when to offer a reward, and when to resort to a time out. Most everything we do is thoughtful, intentional, and done with years of experience behind it. Be wary of offering suggestions. It’s safe to assume we’ve tried everything (twice) and have zeroed in on what does and doesn’t work for us.

Love our child for exactly who he is.

Silly, loud, inconsiderate, affectionate, extremely messy, and a total handful. He can make you laugh and, minutes later, cause you to pull your hair out in frustration. He will drop a rock in your drink, and tell you to shut up when you compliment his t-shirt. Love him in spite of it. No, better yet, love him because of it. Take time to get to know him and learn what makes him such an incredible, complex, multi-dimensional person. He is one of our never-ending sources of love and happiness, and we are so overjoyed to share him with you.