

# Where You Are

## S4 Episode 3 — 12 Tips for Christmas: Holiday Considerations for Neurodiverse Families

Cross Promotion with Parenting In The Trenches Podcast

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### TRANSCRIPT:

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**Bryn Askwith:** You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. With the holiday season approaching, it's important to acknowledge that every family is unique and that the holiday season does not look the same for all. Today on Where You Are, we're sharing an episode from another great mental health podcast, one that's at the top of our personal playlist, Parenting in the Trenches, a podcast by Karen Peters, child and family therapist and mom herself. If you're curious to learn more about that podcast, head to the link in our show notes.

We were thrilled when we came across a special episode, the 12 Tips for Christmas: Holiday Considerations for Neurodiverse Families. It tackles the complexities of the holidays and offers 12 considerations that can help you increase the joy and peace of the season when you have differently wired children. In the episode, Karen's joined by friend and fellow parent Kim. We love their dynamic together and the tips that they offer parents to address social dynamics and expectations, sensory overload, and thresholds for tolerating change that are often a part of the holiday season landscape for neurodiverse families. So enjoy this one from Parenting in the Trenches and we'll be back soon with more great episodes of Where You Are. Happy holidays.

00:01:21

**Karen Peters:** Welcome to Parenting in the Trenches. I'm Karen Peters, a registered clinical counselor and I'm a mom. We're getting real about all things family from a mental health perspective, so let's get to it.

I'm so glad that you are here with us today because the holidays are on our way, and we've had such an amazing listening response to our series on neurodiverse families. So we thought we would tack on a bit of a special episode focusing on how to navigate the holidays when you have kids who process things differently than you do. So if your children have ADHD, autism, sensory integration differences, or just neurodivergent in any way, you know as a parent, that holiday bells have a bit of a different ringtone to

them. As kids who experience stimulation in their environments in ways that don't always line up with how we as parents experience them, holidays, like Christmas, can be fertile soil for things like tension, blowups, meltdowns, real big disappointments, complex decision-making around boundaries with extended family and friends. It's not always the wishlist that you are hoping to create, is it?

I am no Christmas elf today. I cannot provide solutions, magic fixes, or neatly wrapped gifts of peace. But as a therapist who listens to stories from parents every day who live in neurodiverse families, and also from my own lived experience, there are specific things that you can be aware of or consider that might help you guide the holiday planning a little better to meet the variety of needs that your family has during the holidays. Because these specific holidays are coming up, I will be referring to Christmas today, but as you listen, please consider what these highlighted considerations might mean for whatever holidays you and your family celebrate.

The idea is that the special, the loud, the bright, the group involved times and events in our lives fall outside of our carefully established routines. Those environments and dynamics we've really diligently set up to work for us. These become times of heightened stress, changes, transitions, more sensory input, and they call on all our strategies and our strength of our interpersonal connections and support.

Today I am joined by Kim, a mom who has become wise from experience and adaptive in her approaches to parenting, and we're just going to share our 12 tips of Christmas. These are things to consider and I will do my utmost not to break into the tune of 12 Days of Christmas, because if anything's going to send you into a spiral this holiday, it would be that.

So let's dive in. Okay, number one, preload the hosts. Do you have a take on that? Do you want to start with that one?

00:04:52

**Kim:** I can start with that one. I think we're so used to preloading our kids and we're putting a lot of expectations on them. So our kids are already dealing with enough anxiety and high stress during the holidays, so preloading them can help, you know your kid best, but preloading can also add a lot of extra anxiety for them to have to perform and have feelings about doing things the right way. So if you can preload the guests a little bit, who are hopefully high functioning adults who want to add to everybody's experience, you could give them some suggestions for what makes your kid comfortable or what might really set them off, and that maybe you have to leave early without announcing.

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**Karen Peters:** And I think about ways of communicating that, because some people are uncomfortable with having that conversation, they don't know how it's going to be received. But even sending an email or heads up or not even having to make it a huge deal, but just alerting people, " These are the things that might happen. Don't take it personally," right?

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**Kim:** Yeah, exactly. And we'll say from the top that every kid is so different and every family member that you're dealing with is so different. So you know the ones who aren't going to welcome a request like this and you know the ones that are.

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**Karen Peters:** Absolutely.

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**Kim:** So none of these will apply to everybody.

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**Karen Peters:** Amen. Very good. Okay. Number two, your kids might surprise you.

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**Kim:** I think in either direction.

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**Karen Peters:** In either direction, don't assume.

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**Kim:** No, don't super protect them from the opportunity to do well. They might surprise you and really enjoy something that you didn't think they would. And for some of us, this has been two years since we've been to a big event or a full year, and kids develop a ton in that year. And you've been doing some work, probably, with your kids around their anxiety or whatever's hard for them. So you might think that they're ready for something and they might surprise you that they're really not. So this probably goes along with the lower your expectations one, but we'll get to that.

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**Karen Peters:** And I like the other direction too, because if we're out of practice doing these things, particularly in the last couple of years, we might assume that nothing has

improved and then we impose our own anxiety, because we're overloading, over preloading thinking it's going to be exactly the same as two years ago. And so either/ or just check yourself.

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**Kim:** Yes.

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**Karen Peters:** Check your expectations and your... Yeah. Okay. Number three, attune to your kids' physiological cues.

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**Kim:** This is one that I've heard from other people is really valuable and I try to use this one, not always to success, but their physiological clues tend to come before the meltdown or before the event you don't want to happen. So I mean you can do more research. I'm not an expert on this, but things like if you know your kid's baseline and you know what their normal heart rate is, just sticking a hand on their chest to see where they're at. If their heart's just firing a fire, you can tell that they're really elevated.

One of my kiddos always got these giant pupils, super dilated pupils, sweaty, clenched fists. They're all running around, they're all being kids, but some of them are just physiologically way above the rest. And then it gives you the opportunity to have a little break. Or can you help me get something from the car? Or let's do a quick coloring break, just to take it down a notch before they really can't come back from it.

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah, catching it early. So watching for physical signs, those are good ones. The pupils definitely resonates with me. Get some eye contact and see where they're at. If they're hypervigilant, they'll be watching for stress cues in their environment. So the other end of it is those kids who respond to hyper arousal, so they go into kind of shutdown mode. So kids who are not responding to you at all when you're asking questions, they seem checked out, that is also a sign of overwhelm. So noticing how their posture is, their eye contact, their responsivity to anything, your touch, your gaze, your questions, things like that.

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**Kim:** People might be familiar with the flight, fight, or freeze, and if that's easier to relate to, you can watch for that.

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**Karen Peters:** Exactly.

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**Kim:** If you can't feel a heartbeat or if you can't look at the eyes, you can just kind of watch what their general stance is that gives you hints.

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**Karen Peters:** Totally. Actually, when you say that, a lot of times we don't tack on the fawn response. So fawning is another stress response kids can have. And that makes me actually think about, the holidays are primed for that, because kids are wanting so badly to be accepted by the people around them that if they feel that they're not going to be accepted, they go into hyper performance mode. So they pour it on thick.

So it's an attempt to keep an attachment, feeling secure, but it comes from a place of not feeling like they can just be themselves. So wanting to always say the right thing or be super sweet, sugary sweet with people. And those are also signs that the way kids are talking to people in your family, if they seem out of character to pay attention to, that might be an indicator that they're feeling really worried about being okay in that space with people.

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**Kim:** That's a good one. I was not familiar with that one very much.

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**Karen Peters:** Fawning is not something we talk a lot about. And I actually think we should probably do an episode just on that, because I've had a lot of questions from parents who go, "Somebody mentioned this to me, I have no idea what that looks like." And I think it's harder to picture, because it doesn't look stressful. It looks kind and it looks... It's the anxious kid in the classroom who goes unnoticed because they're doing all the right things, but then they're exhausted when they come home, because all they've done is try to fly under the radar by being the best kid at everything. It's the perfectionism.

Okay, so we have preloaded the hosts, talk to your kids, so they might actually surprise you. Watch for that. Attune to your kids' physiological cues. Number four, I added this one in, reflect and I like the word bullet journal because I don't want you to feel like you have to sit for hours with a book and flesh this all out. But make some points about what you observe about your kids and their sensory experience in particular.

So just even sit down for a sec and take a pulse. What are your kids' current triggers? And what are the things that soothe them? So I don't know if you've ever tried that or I

think a lot of us just do this mentally, we don't even sit down and write them down, but we're always assessing. What's going to set them off? And what are we going to do to help soothe and calm their nervous system?

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**Kim:** It's all part of that just being really curious about what's going on with them. If you watch them long enough and be like, "What came before that? What is going on?" It's so confusing sometimes, and sometimes things set them off and then it seems like that thing didn't set them off the next time. If you keep in the back of your mind the things you've reflected on when you're at these things or when you're preparing to go to events that might be stressful, you can plan ahead. And it gives you a bit of a layer of like a buffer, so that you've got some tricks in your back pocket. You know that last time, that noisy Santa in the front yard, set them off.

You could preload the host and ask them to turn it off for your entry. You could get a seat at the end of the table. You could put a fidget in their pocket. You could bring the stuffy. You could bring the blanket. You could have an out. You could ask the host if there's a room that you can use. If you think ahead, because you know what you think you might see and how those things have happened before and the impacts of them, it gives you an extra... You don't have to sit there hyper-vigilant about what might happen, but if you've got those things in your pocket, if things come up, then you've already seen this. And again, they might surprise you. Maybe that doesn't set them off.

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**Karen Peters:** A sense of feeling prepared gives us a sense of calm. We go in feeling like I've done what I can to just front load myself. I've prepared myself the best I can, and I've thought through what I know to be true for my kid at times. And I've come prepared to have that as part of whatever experience we're going to have today.

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**Kim:** And everybody with kids like this knows that this is going to be a hard time of year. It's not going to alleviate all your problems to do any of these things, but it's just doing your best and hoping for the best. And if it doesn't work out, you've done that before too. You'll get through it. Yeah, it is...

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**Karen Peters:** That's well set for number five, which is the lowering of your expectations, both of yourself and your kid. So it's almost doing a reset of what is it that I'm actually hoping for? What am I invested in having happen? And is that realistic?

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**Kim:** Yeah, I think we just naturally all hope for success. We hope it's going to be a good one. We hope it's going to be better this year. We hope. We hope. But don't confuse that with your expectations. Lower your expectations for your kids and hope to be pleasantly surprised. And lower your expectations for yourself in how you react and how you present compared with how you think you should. And ask yourself why those things are so important. And if your end goal is to have a quality experience relationally with your kid, I think a lot of those things that we think we need to portray can fall away.

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** And your expectations can just be that you are all doing your best.

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah, absolutely.

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**Kim:** And maybe that's enough.

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**Karen Peters:** In the intro is talking about an experience of disappointment, and I think this is what was kind of in the list of things we can sometimes be getting ourselves prepared for in the season. Because we've had these experiences where we set something up and we front load with positivity, we get everybody jazzed about it, and we say, " But let's just have a great time." That doesn't just happen. That's so much about how we've prepared, but we go in hoping and setting the bar so high because it's well intended for everyone.

We want everybody to have that lovely experience. But the problem might be that we've expected too much to even make that possible. So if we can change what we expect, maybe then we won't have that disappointed feeling, because it is what we thought probably would've happened. And it's the best that we can create with what we've got going. And hard is not avoidable. It's going to be part of those things.

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**Kim:** And they are still people who we are planning things for, right?

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** Put it in an adult context, if your boss goes and plans this big affair that's not really your jam and you're uncomfortable in the setting and with the people you're with. And they're like, "Rah rah, we're going to have so much fun," and you're just not feeling it, you can't make that up. And that's disappointing to the host of whatever you're doing that not everyone's having a good time, but you're also not being set up to have a genuinely good time, for you.

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**Karen Peters:** Hard to be authentic in that space, right.

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**Kim:** Exactly. That's a better way to put it. And so that's what we're doing to our kids, often, when we set up these things.

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**Karen Peters:** I want this for you.

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**Kim:** And they either on that day can't do it, but they feel like they have to. I mean people who are parenting children like this know all these things, this is not new to them. But give yourself the grace at the end of that to be like, "Oh yeah, we tried." It's not always the best day.

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**Karen Peters:** It's not always the best day. And it doesn't mean that we throw the whole thing out either.

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**Kim:** Of course not.

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**Karen Peters:** If it doesn't match our expectations, we might walk away feeling the sense of disappointment, but at some point, when we process that, we might be able to kind of pluck from that some things where we go, "Actually, I watch them laugh through dinner." Isn't all, the baby doesn't go out with the bath water. There's a lot of good stuff. It just, our first instinct might be to be in touch with the thing that didn't go as we had hoped.



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**Kim:** Exactly. And we are sort of talking here as if there's only one child to consider, and the vast majority of people have either more than one neurodivergent child or kids who are neurotypical also in the mix. And you cannot just cater to one person all the time. These things have to be parts of families or parts of communities. So we are doing things that don't suit us perfectly all the time. That is part of life. But if you are considering these kids having the hardest time and trying to have them function well in it, then there are always a few accommodations here and there that we're making.

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**Karen Peters:** Number six, set up a code word with your kids. To me, I'm thinking, when we wrote that one down, I was thinking dignity preservation. Those times where you try and let your kids save face. We don't need to expose all the background of what we see happening at the tip of the iceberg that's coming out at a family gathering.

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**Kim:** This is great for those kids who can identify their physiological signs, and who can identify... Use whatever model you want when they're peaking and they know they need an out, they don't have to make a big deal out of it. Do whatever works for your family. "Mom, I forgot my jacket in the car," or a hand signal, and then you can be like, "Hey, I forgot something in the car." There's always something. You're an adult, you can come up with something that works for you guys.

And you can also have a code word in the other direction. If you see your kids struggling and they don't have the wherewithal to call the code word, you can say the same thing or give a signal. And you're just going to go outside and you're going to regroup and come back in, or not-

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**Karen Peters:** Love it.

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**Kim:** Whatever you choose.

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**Karen Peters:** What I like about this one too is if your kids can use a code word, and this is a strategy that you think they're capable of doing, they're also capable of collaborating with you ahead of time, which is half the front loading. So sit down with your kid and go, "Man, these things are overwhelming sometimes, I get that too. I could

use a code word. Let's come up with something. What do you think? What will you notice that feels too much as opposed to it's not comfortable but I can manage it? And what word do you want to use?" And that alone sets your kid up for feeling like I'm walking into that scenario with some kind of agency, some kind of sense of power and control, and you get me and we get each other and we've got each other's back.

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**Kim:** Totally. And I think isn't that part of what is so hard for these kids that they don't have any control in these situations in particular?

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah.

**Kim:** They don't-

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**Karen Peters:** Panicked.

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**Kim:**... get to decide who they're standing next to. They don't get to decide what they're eating that day. They don't get to decide what's going to come in that gift that they have to act like they like. There's so many things that make them uncomfortable. If they've got one extra thing, if your kid is capable of that, why wouldn't you offer them that control of themselves?

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**Karen Peters:** I love that one. Love it. Number seven, this one's not as easy. Okay, we were really on it with this one, be assertive with family about what you need.

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**Kim:** Sounds so easy.

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**Karen Peters:** Sometimes we're scared. It sounds so easy. But then I'm imagining certain people in my family and having to tell them, " Sorry, that time of day doesn't work, and I'm going to disappoint the other 20 guests that you already arranged this with." Right?

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**Kim:** Yeah. I think when you're holding those boundaries, you have to also have a line for yourself of how important it is to stick to each of those. You can put in the requests, but if it's more important for you to be with your extended family than it is to have that specific time of day, then you're going to have to bend if they're not going to reschedule. Or it may be that makes it a no- go, if it can't be-

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**Karen Peters:** Make or break it.

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**Kim:** Yeah. And that's different for everybody, every kid, every situation. But know ahead of time what your goal is with what you're asking. And some asks are so small, "Can my kid have a seat at the end of the table, because they can't be-"

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah, in the center.

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**Kim:** I mean, there's so few functioning adults are going to say no to that.

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**Karen Peters:** Right.

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**Kim:** People also have a heart for your kids. You're not the only one who is trying to-

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**Karen Peters:** That's a good point.

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**Kim:** ... support your kids. And you know those people again. You know who's not going to support you in that. So use what you've got. Use the people who are willing to help you.

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**Karen Peters:** Part of this I think requires us to address our fear of disappointing other people. We have patterns in our families that have nothing to do with our kids. And so we've learned who we're going to feel rejected by if they're not going to bend for us. And a fear of that response brings up our own stress. And so I think sometimes it's how we're going to process that and understand what is worth it for us, and maybe working

that through that that's actually at our level, a dynamic that we need to work through that's less about your kids. It just comes alive when it comes to kids, because they're things you feel excited about having to talk about. This is going to make a big difference for our kids if we do it, but it probably comes up in other ways.

Like the mom that every time we say this, they're like, "No, it has to be a turkey." There's just things people are really tied to and those cause eye rolling for people and like, " Oh here we go again. This is so stressful. Why does that have to be a big deal?" And so if one of those dynamics is, "I am scared to disappoint people by asserting what I need or what my kid needs," we need to also take a look at that. I think when we're trying to figure out ways of being assertive with them, is probably the underlying factor.

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**Kim:** And practicing small nos can go a long way. If you're not used to saying, "No," or, "We can't do that," then, "No, we can't come at 4:00, but we'll come after dinner, because things are quieter. And then we can just socialize." Just realizing that you can't control how other people are offended by your choices. They're going to be offended. You can't help that.

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**Karen Peters:** And there's such a line between what we're comfortable sharing too. Because sometimes it goes a long way to explain the context. So to leave it a mystery as to why you're making that request, sometimes gets received differently. So if I'm going to say to someone, " It would really go a long way, because if we don't, this is what the worry might be. And we're really trying to make this a success for everybody. We want it to be well received. We want gift giving to go really well, and these things will really help it go well for everybody." That makes a person more likely to say, " Oh, well that makes sense to me. I can get on board with that."

Whereas if we're just saying, " You know what, I'm not doing that, because doesn't work, so let me know if you can change it."

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**Kim:** Exactly.

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**Karen Peters:** Doesn't have the same... But at the other end of the spectrum, we don't owe everybody our personal details. So if that feels too exposing or vulnerable for our kids to describe every little reason why we need that, that goes too far the other way. So even for us to just sit with that and wonder, where do I sit on that continuum? And is this

an appropriate circumstance to be giving a bit more information? Or nope, that's not part of the deal here.

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**Kim:** I've used in school, instead of saying, " My kid needs this," I've more framed it, so an equivalent would be toward the host, that, " For all the kids, I think, it might be easier if..." Instead of just making a-

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**Karen Peters:** (inaudible) .

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**Kim:** And then you're less likely to have to explain why that's a particular thing for your kid. And every family, again, different. So people might already know your thing. You might have-

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**Karen Peters:** Totally.

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**Kim:** ... family who don't know anything, and you don't want them to know. So respect that about your own choices too. You don't have to tell people or they might know, and you're great with that. But that really changes the dynamic of what you're doing. So there are always creative and respectful ways to ask people to modify things. And if they choose not to, they choose not to. What did you lose?

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**Karen Peters:** Exactly.

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**Kim:** Nothing.

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**Karen Peters:** Yep. Exactly.

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**Kim:** You might choose not to attend but you don't-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes. Right.

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**Kim:** ... lose your dignity or-

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**Karen Peters:** No.

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**Kim:** ... your privacy. So I think it's worth it if it matters to you.

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah. Number eight is keeping gifts appropriate for your kids' development. So this sometimes gets tricky for neurodivergent kids, because we don't always know how to assess where they're at developmentally. So age is different with stage-

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**Kim:** I've got a hot take. I got a hot take on this one.

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**Karen Peters:** Okay, go.

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**Kim:** First of all, the not hot take is that I think you should be giving specific good suggestions to other people who are buying gifts for your children.

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** Don't let the aunt who got their name, who doesn't know them, but then a Lego set for a 12- year- old, when they're at a two- year- old level-

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**Karen Peters:** Thank you.

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**Kim:** ... send them a link-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes, suggestions.

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**Kim:** ... or order it on their behalf.

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** For these kids who it's actually going to blow things out of the water for, it's worth it. My hot take is that surprises are great, but maybe if they accidentally know their gift ahead of time, it's better. No surprise... You know your kid, they're all different.

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**Karen Peters:** That's a good one.

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**Kim:** For some kids, they can not manage the surprise.

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**Karen Peters:** Right, the unknown.

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**Kim:** It's just too much, and then they've got this thing in front of them. It's like when I run into a person who's in the wrong place where I know them from elsewhere, I'm always... Not that I don't love them and want to see them, I'm just baffled and taking them aback.

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**Karen Peters:** Frozen.

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**Kim:** It's very strange. But-

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**Karen Peters:** Totally.

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**Kim:** ... for kids, I've seen it, and if they knew ahead of time-

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**Karen Peters:** They could enjoy it.

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**Kim:** ... or accidentally found out, they could already know that they're-

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**Karen Peters:** I love it.

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**Kim:** ... excited about it, and that's what you'd see. So don't tell my kids that that's something I've used on them.

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**Karen Peters:** Okay. I won't. I won't send them the link to the podcast. Okay.

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**Kim:** Thanks.

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**Karen Peters:** Oh, my goodness. Really, at the end of the day, what is the point of the gift? You're trying to get them to enjoy the experience, not be frustrated by the experience. So wherever possible, keep that in mind that it isn't just how big it is, how expensive it is, how colorful it is, even what they've asked for. Kids ask for all sorts of things. They can't necessarily assess their own ability, just because something on the box looks like it's going to be fun. Some airplane model that requires fine motor skills that your kids don't yet have. Of course, that looks awesome, and of course they want it. But just by saying yes to that, because they think they want it, are you setting them up for a month of throwing parts across the room in frustration? And you building it, because that's the only other way you're going to get it done.

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**Kim:** We all want our kids to have the things they want at Christmas. Everybody wants to give their kids the gifts they want. But you're the adult, you've got to think little bigger picture, and-

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**Karen Peters:** That's right.

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**Kim:** ... oh, maybe we didn't get that one this year.

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**Karen Peters:** Yeah.

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**Kim:** Maybe next year.

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**Karen Peters:** Well, and for neurodivergent kids, so many of them are exceptionally bright, but don't have physiological skills to match. So they could read the chart that says how to put the plane together faster than most kids could, but their fingers don't operate the way they want them to. So just even thinking about that, where is the threshold where your kid meets enjoyment with this gift? And if that's not this year, it's okay. Pick something in the same theme, but fits their skillset.

Number nine, reevaluate traditions that no longer serve you. That one's been coming up a lot in with parents, and it doesn't matter who your kids are, it doesn't matter if you have kids, this is like COVID specific as well. People are starting to question, " How many of these things do I just do on autopilot? How many of these things do I actually enjoy? Make me feel closer to people? Help me celebrate whatever faith tradition I have? Are these things that I actually feel of are valuable? Or have I-

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**Kim:** Yes.

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**Karen Peters:** ... always just done it because that was a passed down tradition for the sake of tradition?"

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**Kim:** It is glaring now, isn't it?

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**Karen Peters:** It is.

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**Kim:** Because of COVID.

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**Karen Peters:** It's so in your face.

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**Kim:** IT IS In everybody's face. We missed a whole bunch of things and some people were like, " I didn't actually miss anything. I didn't ever want to do those things anyway. And this was the test."

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**Karen Peters:** I don't want those things. I want to keep that one not happening.

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**Kim:** It was the best Christmas ever. I didn't have to go anywhere. I didn't have to make meals for people. I think it's just really important to ask yourself why these things have been important to you. And for some people just that something is tradition is important. They-

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**Karen Peters:** That's right.

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**Kim:** ... like tradition. Some people only do it because their parents will be upset for four months if they don't do it.

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**Karen Peters:** Obligation.

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**Kim:** Is that enough for you? Maybe, for some people that is. That's also personal. And you also, if you're building a family or your kids are growing up, maybe you want to start new traditions that work better for your family. So none of it's right or wrong.

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**Karen Peters:** There's something intentional about it. You're actually pausing long enough to think about what do I want to eliminate? But also what do I want to add? And how would I craft that in a way that feels purposeful and meaningful? Not just because other families do it. The glow Christmas drive when you walk through all the light displays, for some kids that is so overstimulating, but you think, but, " It's the thing that everybody does. What a fun tradition. And we get candy after." But for other kids, it's like, how tempting is that? Every craft table you pass, you want to buy something and

they can't buy something. And is that worth the torture of constant temptation for things that they can't regulate around, just because it seems like-

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**Kim:** Santa pictures.

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**Karen Peters:** Oh, good grief. I'm so far out of that stage because my kids are 10 and 13. I have not thought about... Yeah.

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**Kim:** Santa pictures.

00:34:31

**Karen Peters:** Oh, those are the worst, the most contentious. For so many kids that is, don't talk to strangers but go sit on that dude's lap that has a mask on basically, and tell him things that matter to you. And let me take a picture of it, and then hand it out to all the family.

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**Kim:** And some kids-

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**Karen Peters:** I know that is not for everybody.

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**Kim:** ... like it.

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**Karen Peters:** They do.

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**Kim:** It's pretty clear if your-

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**Karen Peters:** Good for them.

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**Kim:** ... kid doesn't like it.

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**Karen Peters:** Right. You don't owe it to anybody. Don't force it.

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**Kim:** And then the point being, why? Do you need-

00:35:07

**Karen Peters:** Right, why?

00:35:07

**Kim:** ... this, because you have pictures of you with Santa every year? Is that enough for... Maybe it is enough for you, I'm not trying to be judgy about it, but why are these-

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**Karen Peters:** Question it.

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**Kim:** ... things important to you?

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** If they don't go well and you're forcing it anyway, what is it about this that you're trying to get out of it? And if you need to have that, realize it's your need, and then maybe you could-

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**Karen Peters:** Call it what it is.

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**Kim:** ... modify it to make it more palatable for your children. I don't know. It's a bit of a tough one. Because tradition is important, but why are you holding those ones? And have they served you to this point?

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**Karen Peters:** And what components? Yeah, that adaptation, I love that one because it's not saying, " We don't do that anymore." It's saying, " How do we make it work for us?" So what parts of it don't work? If it's a long drive to go to the thing, then maybe

that's not the location you have that experience in. Can you switch it up? Lots of ways we can get creative around that.

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**Kim:** Well, and some people, this is a non- issue for them. They don't have a ton of family close by. They have found something that works. But for the people who find themselves dragging kids to things-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:**... that's a great question to ask yourself.

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**Karen Peters:** Love it. Okay. Simplify demands. I guess, another way of rewording this is instead of quantity, go for quality. At the end of the holidays, if you look back and reflect, are you proud of doing something every single day or twice a day? You could count the things up and say, " Woo, did 25 things this Christmas that were so- called special." Or do we go, " You know what, I'm so happy we laid really low. But pick those two top priority things, outings, or events that we did and we've had the energy to do them well."

00:37:16

**Kim:** I think this is great, especially for people who work well with a goal to look forward to. So if you're preparing yourself for this Christmas vacation or spring break, whatever it is, this chunk of time, you're like, "At the end of these two weeks, I want to be able to say that we had one great family dinner out." If that's something that your family likes to do, "And that we visited family," or, "That we made a plane trip," or just a couple things that are your... For me that kind of works, because I like to have in my head what I think. Of course, you always have to change your mind and change your goals as things go.

But instead of the, "We're going to do the 12 Days of Christmas, and we're going to go to this light show, we're going to see everything. We're going to see all the people." If you get to and things are going well, great, but if you... It's like the expectations, lower them down, try just to do the few things well, and then everything else is just extra on top.

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**Karen Peters:** Exactly.

00:38:26

**Kim:** Or even those two things really suck. And then it's a very hard year. Let's be honest, your best laid plan-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes, it happens. Absolutely.

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**Kim:** ... still cannot go as planned. No matter how little you plan and how little things you go for. It's-

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**Karen Peters:** Absolutely

00:38:45

**Kim:** Hold it all very loosely and just everybody's trying their best.

00:38:51

**Karen Peters:** The next one ties into that, it's spreading things out. So when you were talking about, it reminded me of accumulation, so stimulation that accumulates over time. So if you pack everything in, so if you got 12 things, you packed every day with something, by day four or five and your kids are overloaded, it doesn't just necessarily take one day to unwind, and then get back into the flow of things. If it's too much and they carry that and it doesn't get processed like a buildup and they're carrying that buildup into the next event that you go.

So in addition to simplifying the number, reducing the number, and going for more of a good experience for everybody, also think about how you pace yourself through the holidays. If you're going to do three or four things in a two- week span, and you think, "I've nailed this. I've really simplified it. We've been able to kind of say what's priority for us? We're excited about this," maybe don't do those four things all in a row.

Because by time three you might be disappointed that they couldn't have experienced it well, but if you had spread them out two days apart, it gives a real decompression for each event. I know that has worked for us when we plan ahead about family gatherings. We cannot have them all on one weekend. And in fact, even every weekend in a row doesn't work, because it starts while they're still in school. First weekend of December we've got a family event, and then I've got a work event and then you've got whatever. But that for them is throwing everything off and that impacts their nervous system. So

just being mindful of pacing yourselves, and wherever possible, see if it works to have a decompression day between each day of activity that feels special and unique. Just restores them before they go in.

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**Kim:** And this even happens without events. Them just knowing it's a change in routine, some of these kids are already, every day is amping up a little more or something is off a little more, and you're cumulatively seeing this dysregulation. Even if you've not gone to a big event or Christmas lights or whatever, it's just-

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**Karen Peters:** The anticipation of, or the buildup or the something's off, something's changed.

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**Kim:** By the end of the two weeks, no matter what you've done sometimes, it is just too much. So to spread things out I think does a lot of people, even adults a bit of a hand.

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**Karen Peters:** That was good that you mentioned that, because our number 12 is not just about the restoration in between things, but it's how do we refresh and remember actually for our neurodivergent kids in particular, and for the rest of us who are more neurotypical, change takes time? And it's just as much of a change to go from our routine into something special and loose and unstructured as it does to go... We finally somewhat adapted and then we have to go back in. So coming back to the clock as our registered kind of indicator of we got to be somewhere now, the lunches need to be made, the clothes has to be out and ready. To get back into that mindset of that routine is not an easy transition for many of our kids.

So even starting and thinking the three or four days before we get back into that, we are not booking the things that we know cause more accumulation of stress. In fact, we're going to start rehearsing some of the routines when we've got a lot of grace going on the weekend before Monday hits. Right?

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**Kim:** Yeah. I've found that transition from my kids to be harder going back-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes. To the routine.

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**Kim:** ... to... And a lot of our kids like this have trauma history, and there's a lot of triggers that come up over these times. Whenever there's something out of the ordinary, they're not just in this routine that we've set for them anymore, their brain's not following that. Now, they're got more free time and they've got other things and they're seeing people they don't normally see. They're hearing from perhaps birth family or having appointments that we put in these times, when they don't have school that maybe set them off a bit. And so these triggers with grief and loss-

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** ... those are huge. And they can kind of bury it in the chaos of this holidayish time. And as soon as we go to clamp down again, and it's time to make a lunch, go to school, and act like a normal human being, because that's what everybody expects of you when you do these things again, they don't have the wherewithal to do that. They are reeling from, we may not even know.

00:44:02

**Karen Peters:** Yes.

00:44:03

**Kim:** So that transition requires a lot of grace and especially with a certain, I don't want to say a type of kid, but you know your kid. If your child struggles in those first two weeks after spring break and after Christmas every year, there's something to that I think that you need to identify. Well, not identify what it is, but recognize that it's happening.

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**Karen Peters:** It's happening.

00:44:27

**Kim:** And the extra grace and time, and maybe they need to connect with you more in that week, because now they've been with you for two weeks.

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**Karen Peters:** Yes.

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**Kim:** And now they're feeling all these things and you're going to send them off to school again or to daycare or whatever. So I don't know, I'm not an expert and it's a lot of things that are all complicated for a lot of people, but to keep in mind in the exit of those holiday times that it can be harder than all the things we just talked about.

00:44:58

**Karen Peters:** That's right. Absolutely. That's very true. We covered 12 things, I think we could probably have gone on and on, because there are so many things we've had to dissect over the years and try and figure out ways around and adapt. But at the end of it, I think our sentiment has been throughout these 12 tips that we recognize every family is different. Not everything's going to work, but they are tools we've learned along the way that somehow have helped our kids or helped us as a unit, as a family gel differently during times of change in transition. And so always worth trying, because if ever there was whack- a- mole parenting, it's parenting differently wired children, right? So-

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**Kim:** Yeah.

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**Karen Peters:** Kim and I wish you a very happy holiday. We also wish you a very realistic holiday. We hope for bonding and connection and for success at whatever that means to you. We want you to come out on the other side feeling good about some of the things that have happened for you and that have been meaningful for you. So we're going to check out here, and enjoy your December break.

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00:47:09

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