

***Service, Support and Success:
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***Unwrapping The Perfect Holidays:
Tips for Staff Serving People with Intellectual Disabilities
Part Two***

Dave Hingsburger and Chanelle Salonia
Vita Community Living Services

Now it's time to look at what kind of experience we want people to have over the holidays. In the previous article we looked at the emotional preparedness for the holiday. This article will look at making the holiday a meaningful and inclusive experience. Believe it or not, we believe, in the clinical department, that the more engaged people are with the season and with each other, the less room there is for problems to develop. Here are ten 'types' of experiences that we think it is valuable for people to have.

- 1) **Make it a sensory experience:** People with disabilities, like all of us, experience the world in a multitude of different ways. Anyone who has ever dropped in to visit a friend who has made a favourite meal knows what it's like to be embraced by a scent and a sense of welcome. One staff found some wonderful pine scented hand cream for a woman with a profound disability who was spending her first holiday away from her family, in a small house with her first artificial tree – the added scent of pine made the holidays for her. She would be noticed going to sleep, smiling with her nose cradled by her hands. So, think about smells and sounds and sights – bake gingerbread, hang tinsel where it can be seen by everyone, find music that all enjoy.
- 2) **Make it an inclusive experience:** People come from all sorts of different countries and cultures, make sure to bring a sense of excitement to sharing traditions. It's a perfect time for people to share of each other's backgrounds and traditions. For some it's a 'turkey holiday' for another it's a 'pasta holiday' for others it's something else. Find out, everyone can share what they like with the group. It's a time for people to grow in understanding and appreciation of each other. If we believe in 'inclusion' shouldn't it begin at home.

- 3) Make it an active experience: One agency we know of has a huge party where they have a 'gingerbread house' competition. Each home creates a gingerbread house and then they have a contest. It's lots of fun and the gingerbread houses get more and more creative every year. There's lots of laughter and fun. At Vita we've adopted this for our member party, but because some who attend have issues with food, we've had a wreath decorating contest. Everyone can be involved, no one is left out.
- 4) Make it a ongoing experience: Throughout the season there are so many festivals and celebrations from so many cultures. Why not arrange for each home to host a pot luck or a dinner on one of those evenings. People will have parties and celebrations to look forward to over the whole season, several different cultural celebrations are marked. One family I know celebrates the 'feast of St. Nicolas' in the Dutch manner by baking cookies. This would be a perfect idea for a celebration – cookies and inclusion at the same time! This takes the stress off having one day be the 'big' day. Several days are now part of the whole season.
- 5) Make it a giving experience: There are so many charities who are in real need for the holidays. The food bank or the local shelter may need extra for the holidays. See if the members want to be part of getting together something for those who are in need. Don't forget the animals in the animal shelter or the kids in the hospital. It's a good way to focus on the power to do good and the point to the celebrations. Taking time to organize and arrange something that is meaningful and also makes the world better for others is a good way to build both character and self esteem.
- 6) Make it a 'responsibility' experience: For years at Vita staff planned a party for the members. After the formation of the self advocate group, they took it over. Now they lead the process and only have assistance as needed from staff. They plan everything, the music, the activities, the food, the flow of the evening. It's a wonderful event and there is a sense of pride and accomplishment when it's all done. The time of 'us' doing for 'them' is passing, rightfully, to us 'assisting' others to do it for themselves.
- 7) Make it a remembered experience: Many people have a very poor history with the holidays. It will take a lot of time for each person to come to see that it's possible for the holidays to include them, to be joyful for them, to be something they want to participate in. Think of giving each person in the house a disposable camera a week before the holidays. Help them snap pictures of the fun activities through the holidays. Catch them having fun and 'snap' ... remind them to 'snap' when they are doing something they'd like to remember.

- 8) Make it an individualized experience: Much has already been suggested, but remember, choice is choice and no means no. If someone doesn't want to participate in a certain activity don't force them. They may be making the absolutely right choice. Someone who is feeling depressed might end up being quite aggressive if made to participate in something loud and frenetic. Aggression, as we all know, is a really good way of saying 'get me out of here.'

- 9) Make it a 'no one left behind' experience: People with significant disabilities can be so easily forgotten in amongst other activities. Seeing someone slumped over in their wheelchair sitting alone at a table while everyone else is up and dancing is not uncommon at events. Don't let this happen. You aren't paid to be at the party, you are paid to facilitate 'party'. Make sure that you keep your eyes open for those who are, as the song writer said, 'so visible, easy to miss.'

- 10) Make it a shared experience: Sitting around talking about what happened is almost as good as having it happen altogether. It's odd how we will debrief with people after something bad has happened, but never debrief after something good. Sit around with people and chat about the holiday, look at the snapshots they showed you. Use what you learn to write something down for next year: Jackson loved, just loved, baking ginger cookies and giving them to friends. Jacquie is a party animal, she loved teaching some of the others how to dance. This kind of notation, written in a holiday celebrations book, make planning for people easier year by year.

Conclusion:

The holidays are work, without question, they take work and planning. By thinking through what kind of experience you want people to have, you can begin to make a holiday that fits everyone. One of the expectations of the season is that we think about each other and actively work to make each other happy. That's a terrific job description to have don't you think? Stay tuned for our next missive ... how to plan for a transition.