**Ella’s guide to navigating the holiday season**

* Being around so many people is overwhelming. Especially when around extended family who I may not be as comfortable with. When around people that don’t know me as well, I often feel the need to mask, and this is very exhausting. I may need to take breaks from the social situation just to be by myself. Don’t be offended, it’s nothing against you. I just need to look after myself.
* Likewise, even if I am able to remain in the environment having a conversation may be a step too far. Sometimes conversation, particularly around those I don’t know as well or who don’t know me as well can take up a lot of energy and become quite hard. If you want to talk, try sticking to simple questions or talk about topics that I find interesting. Questions such as ‘how are you’?’, although they may seem simple are actually quite confusing. I don’t know how honest I am meant to be and often I don’t even know myself, how I am feeling. If you bring up a topic that I have interest in, I may start talking at you and
* I hate surprises, particularly when receiving presents. I find it stressful when expected to open presents in front of people and then give an acceptable reaction. For this reason, I like to help chose and know what I am getting beforehand and not open presents around a lot of people. One thing I saw a family do was have a small square cut out of the wrapping paper so they could see a small part of it.
* When I do get a present that I really like, I may hyper fixate on it and seem to ignore everyone and everything else. This is not me being rude but is what happens when you engage one of my interests. If we have opened presents and then have to have lunch (or any other transition), I may find the transition from my present to lunch difficult. It may help to give me a visual timer and countdown to let me know how long I have until it’s time to have lunch. If possible it may also help to be able to bring the item to the table or have a clear understanding that when I have finished eating, I can go back to it.
* I find it really hard to work out what someone would like and don’t want to buy something that you don’t like or won’t use. I would much prefer you provide me with a list of options of things that you would find useful or like. I would much prefer buying you a groceries gift card that I know you are going to use or something you have asked for. It’s not selfish to ask for something, in fact it makes my life a lot easier.
* With holidays comes extra sensory information. People and music create extra noise, cooking brings smells and Christmas in particular has lots of lights. All this extra sensory information can be overwhelming and in an already stressful and sometimes difficult time, might push me over the edge. You might think that going to the parade or looking at Christmas lights is fun, but for my it can be overwhelming. I might want to go and may enjoy myself, but I will need time to recover afterwards. Fireworks are another thing that may be overwhelming. If I want to watch them but the noise is too much, ear plugs with ear defenders over the top can be a big help. Also trying to find a good spot a bit further away, where you can still see the fireworks but they aren’t as close and therefore loud.
* I don’t always like physical contact. Often it depends on the day and who I’m receiving it from. Forcing me to hug other people can make me feel very uncomfortable. Please don’t do it. I will give physical affection in my own time and I think it will mean more when I give it out of a place of comfort. I can be very particular about the pressure of touch when I do hug, so please respect my needs if I ask for á tight hug with no back stroking’.
* Going to other peoples houses or into environments I am unfamiliar with is difficult, especially when you add in overstimulation and lots of people. I much prefer to stay in an environment I am familiar with an comfortable in, such as my home, and have others come to me. If I do go to someone else’s house, it’s really important that you listen to me when I say I need to take a break or leave. Once I start to feel overwhelmed it can escalate quite quickly and sometimes I wont say anything until I’m nearly at meltdown. It may be helpful to have regulation and safe things in the car so that can be a place to take a break before heading back inside if appropriate.
* Decorations may look nice to others but to me they are just disturbing my safe environment. Please try to leave an area such as my room that is undecorated and just the way I like it so I have a familiar and undisrupted place to go to.
* After any event or occasion or even just when extra things have happened, I am going to be exhausted and may not be able to engage in verbal communication, even if I normally can. I may also being overstimulated very easily and have a low tolerance for things that upset me and build up to a meltdown. I will likely need time alone in a safe place to do things that regulate and calm me.