

"Empowering Passover: Navigating Seder Night and Live To Tell The Tale"

As Passover draws near, families eagerly anticipate the rich traditions and celebratory atmosphere that accompany the holiday. However, for families who have children with sensory issues, behavioral challenges, and/or other special needs, the prospect of navigating Passover Seder, marked by the lengthy reading of the Haggadah and various ceremonial rituals, can be daunting. Preparation beforehand, attention during, and positive reinforcement afterward can help your child manage these changes more effectively, while decreasing, even preventing, emotional meltdowns, ensuring a smooth and enjoyable experience for all involved. Here's how parents can equip themselves and their children for a successful Seder night:

1. Let your child know what's up: Start preparing your child for any changes in their routine a couple of days before the event. Create a visual reminder: In the case of a few upcoming events (first seder, second seder), prepare a calendar with all the events and display it in a place where your child can see it. Review the calendar with your child and keep reminding them of any upcoming changes for the Seder night. For example, you might say, "So tomorrow after school, we will be going to Uncle David's house for the Seder. And on Tuesday, we will visit Grandma Sarah's house... On Thursday, cousin Jacob will come to our house for dinner."
2. Set clear expectations with your child for the Seder night:
 - Explain timelines: Let your child know what time they should start getting ready for the event, when you plan to leave, and how long it will take to get there. For instance, "We need to start getting ready for the Seder at 5 p.m., and we will be leaving at 6:30 p.m. It will take us about 30 minutes to drive to Uncle David's house."
 - Prepare for the Length of the Seder: Acknowledge that the Passover Seder can be a lengthy affair, often spanning several hours. Understanding your child's attention span is crucial. Plan accordingly by incorporating breaks or alternative activities as needed to maintain their engagement and comfort throughout the evening.
 - Set clear expectations for attire, screen usage, and engagement during the Seder. For example, you might say, "You don't need to dress up, but you need to change out of your school clothes before we leave. You can use your iPad on the car ride, but no screens once we get to Uncle David's house. During the Seder, you don't have to remain sitting for the whole dinner, but you need to be with us during the Kiddush." Explain any specific rules or customs applicable, such as remaining seated during certain portions of the Seder or refraining from talking during readings.
3. Introduce Seder Elements in Advance: Familiarize your child with the components of the Seder beforehand. From the Four Questions to the symbolic foods on the Seder plate, providing prior exposure can help alleviate anxiety and confusion during the event.

4. **Create a Visual Schedule:** Develop a visual schedule or timeline of the Seder night's activities. Displaying this schedule where your child can easily see it provides structure and predictability, easing their transition through each stage of the evening.
5. **Explain the house rules for the Seder night and offer guidance on appropriate behavior.** For instance, you might say, "It is okay for you to open the fridge at Uncle David's house, but it is not okay to do so at our neighbor's house. If you are hungry or thirsty, let me know, and I will help you. Aunt Rachel does not like it when kids jump on her couch. If you feel like you need to jump, you can go to the backyard or come and tell me, and we will figure it out together."
6. **Plan for Sensory Sensitivities:** Recognize potential sensory triggers during the Seder, such as crowded rooms or strong smells from traditional Passover foods. Prepare sensory accommodations like noise-canceling headphones or fidget toys and designate a quiet space for breaks if needed.
7. **Engage Your Child:** Encourage your child's active participation in age-appropriate Seder activities. Whether it's asking questions, reciting blessings, or participating in interactive storytelling, involving them helps maintain engagement and interest throughout the evening.
8. **Offer Alternatives:** Provide alternative options for certain Seder customs or foods to accommodate your child's dietary restrictions or sensory aversions. Ensuring suitable alternatives are available helps them feel included without singling them out.
9. **Discuss and Plan for "What Ifs":** Plan a way for your child to let you know when they have had enough or if they need a break. Explain ahead of time what will happen if you see that they are having difficulty regulating their emotions/behaviors: "If I see you are getting too worked up or overwhelmed, we will leave, so you can calm down." Be clear that this is not a punishment.
10. **Coordinate with Your Spouse:** Plan an escape route: Before you go to an event together, agree on a way to signal that "it is time to go NOW." You may consider arriving in two cars, so if needed, one of you can leave with your child, and the rest of the family can stay and enjoy the rest of the party. Decide who will leave and who will stay ahead of time. Decide in advance who will manage specific responsibilities during the gathering and take turns: Before you arrive at the event, agree on who's taking which "shift", who may be looking after and addressing the special needs of your child during dinner, and who may be able to relax during dessert.
11. **Check in with your child during the event:** Sometimes children don't recognize when they are getting overwhelmed until it is too late. Instead, they might say they have a headache or are "too hot." Check in with them during the event and ask them "how's your head feeling?" or "are you hot?" That can help cut back on behavior problems. Find a "calm space" to retreat to in case your child becomes antsy. It could be a quiet corner or a quiet room at the host's house, or you can sit for a little bit in the car.
12. **Give Your Child a Role:** Children behave better when they feel useful and included. Consider giving them a fun responsibility, such as taking photos or entertaining younger

cousins. They can also plan and/or lead an arts and crafts activity or a family game. This helps them feel included and valued. Prepare with your child a “relaxing box” or “feel-good kit” with comfort items like a favorite book, fidget toys, stress balls, small snacks, maybe even a set of comfy clothes. If you see your child is getting overwhelmed, invite them to open the relaxing box in a quiet place.

13. Before, during, and after the event, offer positive reinforcements and give small rewards! Help your child reach behavioral goals and meet expectations by setting a short-term reward system. For example, you can say “if you can get ready to leave in 10 minutes, we will read another story at bedtime tonight.” It is important that the reward is small and given in a short time frame. “Earning points” for a bigger praise is less effective when you need immediate response. Pour on the praise! When your child is doing well during a holiday party or a gathering, show that you notice. Tell them quietly that they are doing great and how proud you are of them: “It was so kind of you to give up the toy to your cousin” or “You are doing such a great job listening to other people without interrupting” or “Thank you for helping grandma clear up the table.” Recognition and praise mean a lot to children, especially when they are trying so hard to meet expectations.

By implementing these strategies, parents can empower their children with special needs to navigate Passover Seder night with greater ease and enjoyment, creating cherished memories for the entire family.