Create A Different Type of Inclusive Holiday Event

When you hear the word inclusive in the context of the holiday event planning you may think about including multiple beliefs into your workplace celebrations. But if you are planning an event that invites the families of your employees to join you should also consider the inclusion of children with special needs.

Holiday celebrations can be a difficult time for some families with special needs children. The noises, lights, smells, people and excitement can be frightening and overwhelming for children in general and more so for those who experience the world a little differently. While your workplace may certainly be happy to include children with special needs that does not mean that your celebrations themselves are inviting.

Parents of children with special needs often struggle with challenges beyond those of other families. These events can be especially daunting for parents with children who have intellectual, emotional, processing and behavioural challenges. Knowing that your child may act or react in ways that others may not understand can make attending workplace festivities exhausting and stressful. Parents are often required to make additional preparations and take extra measures during the events themselves to manage their child's experience and the perceptions of co-workers. Often these concerns lead parents to skip the celebrations.

Although you cannot always plan and anticipate all possible challenges there are a few things you can do to help create a more inviting and inclusive holiday celebration.

8 Tips for creating inclusive holiday events

1. Directly welcome children with special needs: Send an invitation that promotes the event as inclusive for adults and children with special needs. Include a note that asks parents to let you know if there is anything you can do to make the event more inclusive.
2. Share the menu early: If you are catering the event inform everyone about the food (including the name of the carter or supplier). Many special needs children have restrictive diets and with advanced notice parents can better work against this.
3. Plan a simple schedule: You may not want to plan every detail and you do not need to plan anything elaborate, however by creating a timetable with 2 or 3 touchstone events you anchor the festivities for parents to plan around. Knowing

activities and timing ahead of time can help parents plan arrival and departure times and prepare their children for the event. Front load the most important activities. Generally shorter times are better. Consider a 1 – 1.5 hours interval to run all of the key events.

4. Offer reserved seating or times: If you have scheduled a visit from Santa, a gift exchange, face painting or something similar allow parents the option to reserve a time for their children to take part. First come first serve may sound fair but some children do not do well when asked to wait in a line.
5. Designate a quiet playroom. In this room have a tv screen showing family holiday movies or playing holiday music. Print off some colouring pictures for children of all ages and include pencil crayons and markers not only crayons. A deck of cards, and simple board games can be useful for older children.
6. Atmosphere and decorations: Yes you can decorate and make the room special. Try to avoid noisemakers and blinking and strobe lights.
7. Gift exchange: If you are providing gifts for children consider avoiding gifts with small pieces or that are loud. Ask parents with special needs children for ideas (within your budget guidelines).
8. Set aside a privacy room. Parents with special needs children may need an opportunity to offer their children a break for a few minutes. Find a room that is not the same room as where the ‘coats’ are stored.

It is generous for any workplace to take the time to plan and host a celebration that includes families. With only a little more awareness and planning these events can be even more generous by providing an opportunity for families who sometimes face more challenges to join in while holding fewer concerns.