Tips for Visiting Family Members

Visiting family can sometimes be stressful and larger family gatherings are usually at times of the year when there are a lot of other things to contend with like Christmas, birthdays or other holidays.
We have put together some top tips to try and make family visits as stress free as possible. These are:

- **Don't be afraid to say no:**

  Don't feel obligated to say yes if it's not the right choice for your family. Try not to think too much about what is expected of you and focus on what is best for you as a family. It may be easier to have family visits at your house instead. If at all.

- **Ensure your family members are aware of and understand the autistic person and their needs including the children (where possible):**

  Help your family to understand why and what's needed by sharing your knowledge with them and answering any questions they have. If it is a particular occasion e.g. Christmas, prepare your family for the changes they could consider making like not wrapping the present. It may also help to notify your family members of potential triggers and signs to signal that a break is needed. Make sure they know at these times it is important for them not to intervene.

- **Prepare the person with tools for leaving stressful situations when they are feeling overwhelmed:**

  Where possible help the person to identify strategies that will calm them in a stressful situation. Depending on the persons understanding they may be able to communicate through a signal or a symbol to let you know that they need a break. Practicing these strategies before an impending visit will help them to manage their emotions more effectively.

- **During visits try to keep routines the same:**

  Try to keep routines such as sleep times and eating times as stable as possible. This is familiarity for the person.

- **Pack a toolkit:**

  This could include things like ear defenders/headphones, fidget toys, and chew toys. These can be a welcome distraction during an anxious time where things may feel unpredictable. Also pack things to keep them busy such as an iPad, colouring books or Lego.

- **Consider how far in advance you are preparing the person**:

  It is good in most situations to try and prepare a person as early as possible. However for some autistic people their concept of time can be poor. Consider using a visual calendar. In some circumstances it may work better to tell them on the day about the plans.

- **If possible arrange a safe space wherever you go:**

  This may be a quiet room of the house where the person can go if they need or if there is not a room, a quiet corner of a room where they could create their own den.

- **Food:**

  Ask about this in advance. It may be that the person is a picky eater and will not like the food that will be on offer so you could bring a different option for them or it may be that mealtimes are a very distressing time for the autistic person so you want to avoid these and visit at a time that doesn't involve that.

- **Use visual countdowns:**

  These could be used when you are preparing to transition or get the person ready to leave.

- **Use visual schedules:**

  It may help to go over the schedule with the person in advance, so they know what is happening and what time things are coming to an end.

- **Be flexible and encourage others around you to be too:**

  Set reasonable goals and be planned for things to not go as planned. Let the needs of the person at the time guide you.