

Runner Up

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Independence Day for most families is a time of fun, excitement, staying up late, enjoying the outdoors, and the sights and sounds of an impressive fireworks display. For my family, Independence day is a day of overstimulation, sensory overload, troubling behaviors, and occasionally the experience of seeing fireworks. With one child on the Autism Spectrum, and another with Sensory Processing Disorder, we have to maneuver through Independence Day carefully. The combination of lots of people, hot weather, loud music, pot lucks, etc. can leave our

family barely hanging on long before it gets dark enough to see a single firework display. Going downtown to see fireworks is absolutely out of the question as we cannot get close to the river. Policing my son to keep him from jumping in would completely wear my husband and myself down after only a short period of time. We are always welcome to come to the family picnic, but planning a dish to share, as well as bringing along foods we know both the children will actually eat is tough, and not always guaranteed. Aside from a small selection of foods that meet the criteria, eating outside can prove to be difficult for my kids. Lack of appropriate seating to keep them upright means very little food actually gets eaten. If my older son is not restricted in moving around either by a special seat, or barracaded in (as if in a booth) he has no desire to eat any food.

When the boys don't eat regular meals, we get cranky kids who turn to stimming, running away, trouble behavior and poor listening. Many times we spend family picnics about as far away from the family as can be pushing the boys on a swing to provide some sensory input so that we can try to get them to sit for a few minutes (just long enough to inhale a hotdog and chips ourselves).

I have yet to experience a fireworks display with my younger son, he just cannot make it through the day. The excitement and stimulation of the day often leaves him without a nap and fast asleep long before it gets dark. My older son actually has experienced a fireworks display, and loves them immensely, but logistically getting him to a fireworks display can be difficult. We are generally far away enough that ear protection is not necessary, and the visual input is enough to keep him sitting for about the length of an average display (15-20 minutes tops).

Both of my children have trouble calming themselves and going to sleep and staying asleep. Neighborhood fireworks often result in multiple night wakings and bouts of crying and screaming because their systems, which have a hard enough time shutting down for night time sleep are periodically jolted awake by unexpected loud noises, music and shouting.

Because my kids are so young, they don't really understand what Independence Day is...so when we opt to not go see fireworks or the picnic, they don't really know the day is any different from any other day. I know there will come a time when they will understand, and through therapy and interventions we will get to a place where we won't have to be so concerned about all of these things, but until that time comes we will celebrate independence day in our own way...and because we have the freedom to do so is a great blessing!