



Christmas in the Classroom: A Trauma-Informed Guide to Supporting Children in Care

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Introduction

The festive season whilst joyful for many, can be a complex and emotionally charged time for children in care. Schools play a vital role in creating inclusive, supportive environments, especially during periods that highlight family, tradition, and belonging. For children who have experienced trauma, loss, or instability, Christmas can bring feelings of grief, anxiety, or isolation rather than celebration. This guide offers practical, trauma-informed strategies to help school staff navigate the season with sensitivity—ensuring that every child feels safe, seen, and supported during this time of year.

Why It Matters: What the Research Tells Us

Christmas is often framed as a time of warmth, family, and joy—but for many children in care, it can be a stark reminder of what they've lost or never had. It's a season that can magnify feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and emotional vulnerability. And critically, the evidence shows that this isn't just a theory – it's a lived reality for thousands of children.

- Between **18 December and 3 January**, an average of **79 children in care in England** are moved to a new home **every day** (Become, 2023).
- In that same period, almost **900 children enter care for the first time**, many experiencing Christmas away from familiar people and surroundings.
- Over **28%** of those moved during the festive period are relocated more than **20 miles away**, separating them from peers, schools, and support systems.
- Children who experience frequent home changes are more than **twice as likely** to develop serious mental health issues, including anxiety, self-harm, and PTSD (University of Bath, 2022).
- And yet – for many – school is the one consistent environment they return to after the holidays. That makes **your role** as school staff deeply meaningful.

"During the holidays, the people we rely on – our teachers and school staff – disappear. It's the loneliest time of year."

– Care-experienced young person, *Become* Charity, 2023

For some children, Christmas means family traditions, gifts, and laughter. For others, it may bring memories of loss, instability, or trauma. This contrast can be painful – especially in school settings where festive activities unintentionally highlight what some children are missing.

Why this matters in schools

- Children in care may return to school in January having experienced another home move – or even entered care for the first time. For some, the festive period may have been marked by instability, emotional upheaval, or feelings of isolation.
- Christmas in schools is often framed as a joyful, family-oriented time – but for children in care, it can be complex and painful. Festive activities can unintentionally **exclude, overwhelm, or trigger** those navigating grief, trauma, or instability. Songs, smells, stories, or assignments like “write about your family traditions” may serve as painful reminders of what’s been lost – or what’s never existed.
- For many children in care, **school is the most consistent and emotionally safe place they have**. Teachers and support staff often serve as key adults in a child’s life. Your approach over this period can offer something vital: **stability, kindness, and psychological safety**.
- Children impacted by trauma tend to thrive in environments where things are **predictable and consistent**. The festive season, with all its changes to routines, unfamiliar events, and sensory overload, can be dysregulating – unless carefully planned for.
- Not all children celebrate Christmas. For some, it’s tied to feelings of exclusion, neglect, or abandonment. Trauma-aware practices help avoid unintentional emotional harm and instead promote **inclusion, safety, and connection**.

Key Message:

Children in care don’t need pity – they need **predictability, connection, and empowerment**. **Schools are uniquely placed to provide this.**

This is more than “being nice at Christmas.” It’s about recognising the emotional complexity this season can bring – and **responding with empathy, structure, and intentional inclusion**.

You might be the most stable adult in a child’s world. Your presence, your language, and your planning can offer moments of **healing, dignity, and hope** – in a season that doesn’t feel bright for everyone.



Putting Trauma Informed Practice into Action at Christmas

Christmas doesn't need to be cancelled. But it **does** need to be approached with care, flexibility, and awareness that not every child finds this time easy. Here's how schools can build safe, inclusive environments during the festive period – especially for those who may be carrying more than they show.

✓ **Be Predictable: Routine is a source of safety**

- Many children in care have experienced environments where routines were unpredictable or unsafe.
- Let children know in advance what will happen – use visual timetables, class calendars, or verbal reminders.
- Keep the classroom structure familiar where possible – even small disruptions (e.g. parties, visitors, decorations) can cause anxiety if unexpected.

“Predictability helps a traumatised brain feel safe.”

✓ **Be Flexible: Not everyone will want to join in**

- Give children clear permission to opt out of Christmas activities without drawing attention to them.
- Avoid forced participation in anything family-focused (e.g. "Write about your Christmas morning").
- Provide quiet alternatives during whole-school events – a reading nook, mindfulness time, or helping with a classroom task can be a dignified way to opt out.

✓ **Be Inclusive: Avoid assumptions about home and family**

- Not every child will spend Christmas with “mum and dad” – or even in the same home from one week to the next.
- Use language like:
 - “What are you looking forward to over the break?” instead of “What’s your family doing for Christmas?”
 - “Who would you like to make a card for?” rather than “Make a card for your parents.”

“Inclusivity isn't about watering things down – it's about making sure no one is left out.”

✓ **Be Relational: Human connection matters most**

- For children in care, **trusted adults** at school may be their most stable and supportive relationships.
- Check in privately with any child you know is in care. A simple “How are you feeling about the holidays?” opens space.
- If appropriate, assign a key adult for informal check-ins in the lead-up to the break.

✓ **Be Empowering: Give children choice and agency**

- Let children choose how (or if) they take part in activities.
- Provide leadership roles or low-stress jobs like setting up decorations, helping with class displays, or choosing music.
- These small choices can help children feel a sense of control and value – something many in care often lack.

Trauma-Informed Festive Activities: Ideas for Primary and Secondary Students

Not all children feel comfortable joining in with typical festive events – and not all activities suit every age or experience. These trauma-aware, inclusive ideas are designed to support children in care and all students by offering ways to engage that feel safe, respectful, and empowering. The focus is on fostering connection, encouraging creativity, and supporting emotional wellbeing – without placing emphasis on family structures or traditional Christmas themes.



Primary School Activities (Ages 4-11)
Simple, sensory, and emotionally safe – ideal for younger children or those needing structure and calm

Activity	How it helps
Winter sensory table (e.g. pinecones, cinnamon sticks, soft fabric)	Calms the nervous system, encourages gentle exploration
Design a 'Cosy Den' Competition	Lets children imagine or draw a safe, comforting space – no family focus
Story Time with Hot Chocolate	Warm, consistent rituals offer comfort and predictability
Kindness Bingo	Encourages positive peer connection with small, achievable actions
Wish Stars for the Classroom Ceiling	Children write or draw something they hope for – can be light-hearted or meaningful
"Warm Words" Paper Chain	Each link includes a kind word or affirmation – builds community visually

SECONDARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES (AGES 11–18)

RESPECTFUL OF INDEPENDENCE, SOCIAL DYNAMICS, AND THE EMOTIONAL DEPTH OLDER STUDENTS MAY CARRY



Activity	How it helps
"Design Your Own Celebration" Brief	Encourages individuality and creativity – students invent a holiday with their own values, foods, and traditions
'Hope Board' or Graffiti Wall "Things I'm looking forward to next year"	Shifts focus to the future; builds agency and optimism
Create a 'Winter Playlist' Together	Students contribute songs that feel calming or meaningful – builds connection without emotional exposure
'Small Joys' Photography Project	Use phone cameras to capture things that make them smile (a pet, a snack, sunlight on a window) – builds mindfulness
Mindful Letter to Your Future Self	Private writing activity that encourages reflection and self-compassion
Positive Post-It Exchange	Students anonymously leave encouraging notes for others – low pressure, peer-led
Drop-In Creative Space at Break Times	Provides a calm, low-pressure space for students who prefer quieter environments, offering creative outlets like journaling or crafts as a way to self-regulate, reflect, or simply take a break from busier festive activities.

Trauma-Informed Principles Behind These Activities

- **Choice:** Opt-in, not forced. Always ensure participation is optional. Offer opt-out spaces during assemblies, shows or parties.
- **Connection:** Builds peer or adult relationships without being intrusive.
- **Creativity:** Encourages expression without personal disclosure.
- **Calm:** Helps regulate nervous systems overstimulated by festive energy.
- **Inclusivity:** No assumptions about family, religion, or home life.



Speaking Gently this Season: Language to Reframe or Avoid

The language we use can either **create connection** or **deepen isolation**. Here's how to gently reframe common school phrases:

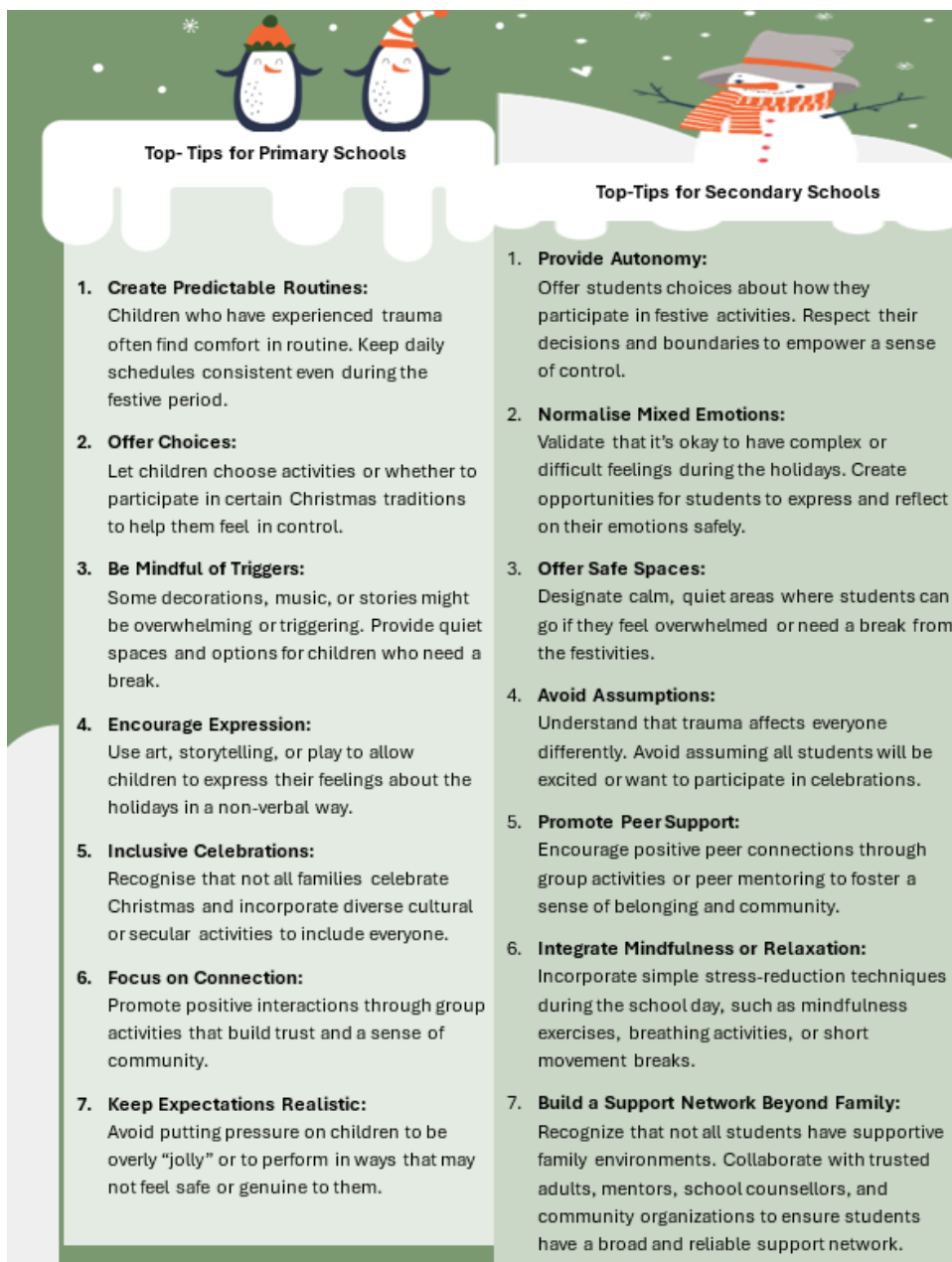
Instead of...	Try saying...
"What are you doing with your family for Christmas?"	"Is there anything you're looking forward to over the holidays?"
"Write about your family's Christmas traditions"	"Write about something that feels special or comforting to you"
"Bring in a photo of your family"	"Bring something that makes you feel proud or happy"
"Let's make cards for Mum and Dad"	"Make a card for someone important to you"
"Everyone should wear their Christmas jumper!"	"Wear a festive jumper <i>if</i> you'd like to take part"
"What did Santa bring you?"	"Did you have a moment over the holidays that made you smile?"

Key Message:

Sensitivity doesn't cost us anything – but it can protect a child's dignity and wellbeing.

Being a Safe Adult During the Festive Season

- You may not always know which children are in care, or which students find this time of year difficult. **It's safest to assume that any class may include children with painful or complex associations around Christmas.** A gentle, flexible approach can make all the difference.
- If you're unsure how best to support a particular student, speak to your school's Designated Teacher for children in care or another safeguarding lead.
- For many care-experienced children, school staff are among the most consistent and trusted adults in their lives. Small things – a warm word, a predictable routine, or a moment of quiet understanding – can leave a lasting impact long after the holidays are over.



The infographic is divided into two columns. The left column is titled 'Top-Tips for Primary Schools' and features two penguins at the top. The right column is titled 'Top-Tips for Secondary Schools' and features a snowman at the top. Both columns list seven tips for supporting children during the festive season.

Top-Tips for Primary Schools

- 1. Create Predictable Routines:**
Children who have experienced trauma often find comfort in routine. Keep daily schedules consistent even during the festive period.
- 2. Offer Choices:**
Let children choose activities or whether to participate in certain Christmas traditions to help them feel in control.
- 3. Be Mindful of Triggers:**
Some decorations, music, or stories might be overwhelming or triggering. Provide quiet spaces and options for children who need a break.
- 4. Encourage Expression:**
Use art, storytelling, or play to allow children to express their feelings about the holidays in a non-verbal way.
- 5. Inclusive Celebrations:**
Recognise that not all families celebrate Christmas and incorporate diverse cultural or secular activities to include everyone.
- 6. Focus on Connection:**
Promote positive interactions through group activities that build trust and a sense of community.
- 7. Keep Expectations Realistic:**
Avoid putting pressure on children to be overly "jolly" or to perform in ways that may not feel safe or genuine to them.

Top-Tips for Secondary Schools

- 1. Provide Autonomy:**
Offer students choices about how they participate in festive activities. Respect their decisions and boundaries to empower a sense of control.
- 2. Normalise Mixed Emotions:**
Validate that it's okay to have complex or difficult feelings during the holidays. Create opportunities for students to express and reflect on their emotions safely.
- 3. Offer Safe Spaces:**
Designate calm, quiet areas where students can go if they feel overwhelmed or need a break from the festivities.
- 4. Avoid Assumptions:**
Understand that trauma affects everyone differently. Avoid assuming all students will be excited or want to participate in celebrations.
- 5. Promote Peer Support:**
Encourage positive peer connections through group activities or peer mentoring to foster a sense of belonging and community.
- 6. Integrate Mindfulness or Relaxation:**
Incorporate simple stress-reduction techniques during the school day, such as mindfulness exercises, breathing activities, or short movement breaks.
- 7. Build a Support Network Beyond Family:**
Recognize that not all students have supportive family environments. Collaborate with trusted adults, mentors, school counsellors, and community organizations to ensure students have a broad and reliable support network.

Final Thoughts

The Christmas season can stir up a complex mix of emotions for children in care – joy, grief, uncertainty, loneliness, or even pressure to appear “festive” when they may be struggling inside. While the holidays are often framed as a time of togetherness and tradition, it’s important to remember that not all children experience the season that way.

For some, Christmas can feel like a painful spotlight – highlighting what’s missing rather than what’s present. But schools can be places where **belonging**, **warmth**, and **safety** shine through. A trauma-informed approach isn’t about removing celebration; it’s about widening the circle, so every child can participate in ways that feel safe and meaningful to them.

As educators and trusted adults, we can’t change a child’s history – but we **can** shape their experience in the present. Small shifts in our language, our expectations, and our activities can make a big difference in how a child feels at school during this time.

You don’t have to fix everything.

But by being trauma-informed, **you can make sure no child feels forgotten.**

And sometimes, that’s **more powerful than you’ll ever know.**

"The best gift we can offer is presence, care, and a sense of belonging – for every child."



Further Resources and Support

<https://beaconhouse.org.uk/resources/> (see Winter Resources)

[A Trauma Informed Approach to Christmas](#)

[UK Trauma Council](#)

[PACE at Christmas](#)

Bereavement:

[Free Online Bereavement Training for Schools | Winston's Wish](#)

[Traumatic Bereavement Resources for Schools and Colleges | Anna Freud](#)

Sensory:

[Managing Christmas Sensory Challenges](#)

[Christmas Sensory Survival Kit](#) (sign up for free sensory survival kit)

Social Stories:

[Free Christmas Social Stories | And Next Comes L - Hyperlexia Resources](#)

Book:

[The Very Wobbly Christmas: A story to help children who feel anxious about Christmas: Amazon.co.uk](#)

[Naish, Sarah, Jefferies, Rosie: 9781726626729: Books](#)