



# A PARENT CARER'S GUIDE TO

**SURVIVING (AND SOMETIMES ENJOYING!)  
THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS**



**Brought to you by the parent carers  
at Choice Wellbeing Service**





# INTRODUCTION



As parent carers ourselves, we know that the school holidays can bring a mix of emotions.

There can be excitement about spending more time together, relief from the school run, and opportunities to make memories. But alongside that can come anxiety, exhaustion, financial pressure, worries about keeping children occupied, and the challenge of managing the loss of routine that many of our children rely upon.

We've experienced the cancelled plans, the days where nothing seems to go right, the pressure to create the "perfect school holidays", and the guilt that can creep in when we're simply trying to get through the day. We've also learned that what works for our families doesn't always look like what we see online—and that's okay.

## **That's exactly why we created this guide.**

Not because we have all the answers, but because we've walked a similar path. We know that caring for a child with additional needs doesn't pause for the school holidays. In many ways, the caring role can become even more intense when school, respite, and regular routines are unavailable.

This guide is designed to offer practical ideas, gentle reminders, and realistic support for parent carers navigating the school holidays. You'll find wellbeing tips for yourself, strategies for supporting your child, and reassurance that you don't need to do it all.

Most importantly, we hope this guide reminds you of something many parent carers forget:

You matter too.

Whether your school holidays is filled with adventures, quiet days at home, or simply doing whatever it takes to get through each day, we hope these pages help you approach the holidays with a little less pressure and a little more compassion for yourself.

From one parent carer to another—we're glad you're here.





# FIRST THINGS FIRST: LOWER THE PRESSURE



**Social media can make it look as though everyone is spending their school holidays:**

- Visiting attractions
- Going on holidays
- Making crafts every day
- Creating magical memories

**What social media doesn't show is:**

- Meltdowns in the car park
- Children refusing to leave the house
- Parents running on empty
- Plans that didn't work out
- The emotional and financial cost of "fun"

**Remember:**

Your child does not need a perfect school holidays.

They need a regulated, supported parent and a safe place to be themselves.

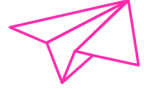
Your child won't remember how many days out you managed.

They'll remember feeling safe, accepted, loved, and understood.

And sometimes that happens on the sofa, in pyjamas, with a favourite film and a snack—not at a costly attraction or a picture-perfect day out.



# TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS



## 1. Remember You're Seeing the Highlights Reel

Most people share their best moments, not the meltdowns, cancelled plans, difficult days, or tears that may have happened before or after the photo was taken. A picture captures a moment, not the full story.

## 2. Notice How Certain Content Makes You Feel

If you consistently feel guilty, inadequate, overwhelmed, or upset after viewing certain accounts, give yourself permission to mute, unfollow, or take a break. Protecting your wellbeing is not rude—it's self-care. Turn off notifications so you are not tempted to scroll after if you need a social media break.

## 3. Focus on What Works for Your Family

Every child is different, every family is different, and every holidays looks different. What works brilliantly for one family may be completely unsuitable for yours. Success isn't doing what everyone else is doing—it's doing what works for your child.

## 4. Limit Comparison Traps

When you catch yourself thinking, "I should be doing more" or "Everyone else seems to be coping better than me," gently remind yourself:

*"I am comparing my everyday reality to someone else's carefully selected highlights."*



## 5. Create More Than You Consume

Instead of endlessly scrolling, spend time connecting with people who understand your journey. Message another parent carer, share a small win, or engage with supportive communities. Social media can be a source of connection as well as comparison.



# PARENT CARER REALITY CHECK

Things I said I won't do this school holiday...



- Use screens more than usual
- Bribe my child with snacks
- Cancel plans at the last minute
- Spend half a day preparing for an activity that lasted five minutes
- Stay in pyjamas until lunchtime
- Call cereal, toast, and a yoghurt a "balanced meal"
- Hide in the kitchen for five minutes of peace
- Promise myself I'd be more organised tomorrow
- Drink a cup of tea cold... again
- Count surviving the day as an achievement
- All of the above

## The Parent Carer Holidays Pledge

This Holidays, I will try to:

- Compare less and appreciate more.
- Remember that every family is different.
- Accept that plans sometimes change.
- Be kinder to myself.
- Celebrate small wins.
- Let go of perfection.
- Do what works for my family.

Because the goal isn't to create a picture-perfect holidays.

The goal is to create a holiday that works for us.

*"Some days we'll make memories. Some days we'll just make it to bedtime. Both are successes." - Tracey*



# UNDERSTANDING WHY HOLIDAYS CAN BE HARD

**Many children with additional needs rely heavily on:**

- Predictability
- Structure
- Familiar routines
- Safe people
- Familiar environments

The sudden removal of school can create uncertainty and anxiety.

**This might show up as:**

- ✓ Increased meltdowns
- ✓ Sleep difficulties
- ✓ Emotional outbursts
- ✓ Increased sensory sensitivities
- ✓ Withdrawal
- ✓ More clinginess
- ✓ More challenging behaviour

Often, behaviour is communication.

**When routines disappear, children may be telling us:**

"I don't know what's happening."

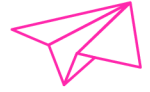
"I feel overwhelmed."

"I need help feeling safe."

The first week of the holidays is often a time of adjustment. Keeping some familiar routines and including activities your child enjoys can help them feel safe, settled, and ready for the weeks ahead.



# CREATING A SCHOOL HOLIDAYS ROUTINE



## Without Scheduling Every Minute

Many parent carers feel pressure to fill every day.

Instead, think about creating a predictable rhythm.

For example:



### Morning

- Wake up
- Breakfast
- Get dressed
- Activity or outing



### Afternoon

- Lunch
- Quiet time
- Free play



### Evening

- Dinner
- Wind down
- Bedtime routine

The activities can change.

The structure stays familiar.

Children often need the routine more than the activity itself.



# THE POWER OF A VISUAL PLAN



Many children with additional needs find it easier to understand and manage their day when they can see what is happening rather than relying on verbal explanations alone.

Visual supports can help reduce anxiety, increase understanding, support communication, and make transitions easier. They can be particularly helpful during the school holidays when usual routines may change.

Remember, visual supports don't need to be complicated, expensive, or professionally made to be effective.

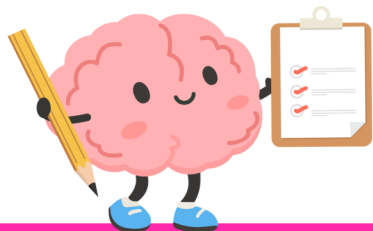
## What Are Visual Supports?

Visual supports are anything that uses pictures, symbols, photographs, words, or objects to help a child understand information.

Examples include:

- Visual timetables
- Now and Next boards
- PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)
- Choice boards
- First/Then boards
- Countdown calendars
- Visual routines
- Emotion charts

The aim is to make the day more predictable and easier to understand.



# USING A "NOW AND NEXT" BOARD

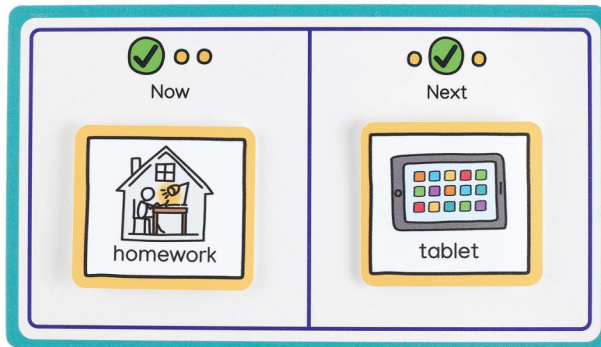
A Now and Next board is one of the simplest and most effective visual supports. It helps children focus on:

**What is happening now**

and

**What is happening next**

For example:



This can be particularly useful for children who struggle with transitions or who become anxious when they don't know what is coming next.

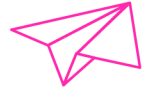
Why it works

- ✓ **Makes expectations clear**
- ✓ **Helps reduce uncertainty**
- ✓ **Supports transitions**
- ✓ **Encourages cooperation**
- ✓ **Provides reassurance**





# HOW TO MAKE A SIMPLE NOW AND NEXT BOARD



You will need:

- A piece of card, paper, whiteboard, or laminated sheet
- Two sections labelled "Now" and "Next"
- Pictures, symbols, photos, or written words

You can use:

- Printed photographs
- Drawings
- Clipart
- Symbol images
- Handwritten words

The board doesn't need to look perfect—it simply needs to make sense to your child.

Many families keep one on the fridge or use a small portable version when out and about.

## What Is PECS?

PECS stands for Picture Exchange Communication System.

PECS is a communication tool often used by children who are non-speaking, minimally speaking, or who find verbal communication difficult. Children use pictures to communicate their wants, needs, thoughts, and choices.

For example, a child may hand over a picture of:

- Drink
- Toilet
- Snack
- Favourite toy
- Break
- Help

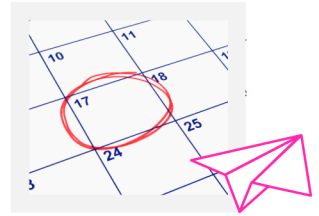
to communicate what they need.

PECS can help reduce frustration and support communication when words are difficult.

Not confident in your crafty skills or just simply don't have the time? Here are some great templates we have created or gathered to begin your now and next board or to use as pecs:



# CREATING A VISUAL HOLIDAY CALENDAR



Many children benefit from seeing what is happening across the week.

You could create a simple calendar showing:

**Monday** – Home Day

**Tuesday** – Swimming

**Wednesday** – Grandma's House

**Thursday** – Park

**Friday** – Cinema

Knowing what to expect can reduce anxiety and provide reassurance.

It can also help children prepare emotionally for activities that may feel exciting or challenging.

The best visual support is the one your child understands and uses.

## Remember

Visual supports are not about controlling behaviour.

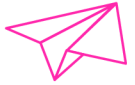
They are about increasing understanding, reducing anxiety, and helping children feel safe and confident in a world that can sometimes feel unpredictable.

During the holidays, a simple visual support can often make a big difference—for both children and parent carers.

## Top Tips for Success

- ✓ **Keep visuals simple**
- ✓ **Use real photographs where possible**
- ✓ **Place them where your child can easily see them**
- ✓ **Update them regularly**
  - ✓ **Be consistent**
  - ✓ **Praise your child for using them**
  - ✓ **Don't worry about making them look perfect**

# THE "ONE THING A DAY" APPROACH



If you're already feeling overwhelmed by the thought of six weeks of holidays stretching ahead, try this simple rule:

## **One thing a day is enough.**

Many parent carers feel pressure to fill every day with activities, outings, crafts, playdates, and memory-making experiences. Social media can make it seem as though everyone else is busy creating magical holidays packed full of adventures.

The reality is that caring for a child with additional needs often requires a huge amount of emotional, physical, and mental energy before you've even left the house.

Instead of asking:

"What can we do today?"

Try asking:

"What is one thing that would make today feel manageable?"

### **That one thing might be:**

- A trip to the park
- A walk around the block
- Feeding the ducks
- A craft activity
- Visiting grandparents
- Going for an ice cream
- Playing in the garden
- Baking together
- Watching a favourite film
- Visiting the library
- Having a picnic in the living room



### **And some days, the one thing might simply be:**

- Getting dressed
- Managing a difficult appointment
- Recovering after a poor night's sleep
- Helping your child regulate after a challenging morning
- Making it to bedtime

#### **That counts too.**

Not every day needs to be exciting.

Not every day needs to be productive.

Not every day needs to look good in a photograph.

Children often benefit just as much from feeling safe, calm, connected, and understood as they do from big days out and expensive activities.

In fact, many children with additional needs can find busy schedules, crowded attractions, and constant change exhausting. A slower pace may be exactly what they need.

## **TRY CELEBRATING THE SMALL WINS.**

At the end of the day, ask yourself:

- What went well today?
- What made my child smile?
- What helped us get through?
- What am I proud of myself for?

You might be surprised how many successes you find.

Perhaps the outing didn't happen, but your child tried a new food.

Maybe the craft activity lasted two minutes, but you shared a laugh together.

Perhaps everyone stayed home, but there were fewer meltdowns than yesterday.

Those things matter.

#### **Remember:**

Sometimes the most successful days are the quietest ones.

And sometimes, simply getting through the day is more than enough.

# MANAGING OUTINGS

## Before you go:

Consider:

Is this activity for my child or for other people's expectations?

Think about:

- Toilets
- Sensory environment
- Queues
- Food options
- Quiet spaces
- Exit strategies

Sometimes a shorter successful trip is better than an all-day outing.

## Creating a Sensory Survival Kit

Depending on your child's needs, consider carrying:

- Headphones
- Fidget toys
- Snacks
- Drinks
- Comfort item
- Sunglasses
- Wet wipes
- Spare clothes
- Tablet or preferred activity

Think of it as a regulation kit, not an emergency kit.



# SUPPORTING CHILDREN DURING HOT WEATHER



Sunny days can be enjoyable, but for many children with additional needs, hot weather can bring additional challenges.

Some children may be more sensitive to heat, struggle to recognise when they are thirsty, find certain clothing uncomfortable, or become overwhelmed by changes to their usual routine.

Understanding your child's individual needs can help make warmer days more manageable for everyone.

## Encourage Regular Drinks

Some children may not recognise when they are thirsty or may become so focused on activities that they forget to drink.

Try:

- ✓ Offering drinks little and often
- ✓ Using favourite cups or bottles
- ✓ Adding fruit to water for flavour
- ✓ Using visual reminders
- ✓ Including high-water foods such as watermelon, cucumber, grapes, strawberries, and ice lollies



## Watch for Signs of Overheating

Children may not always be able to tell us when they are too hot.

Look out for:

- Flushed cheeks
- Increased irritability
- Lethargy
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Increased meltdowns
- Difficulty concentrating



Sometimes what looks like challenging behaviour may actually be discomfort.

## Think About Sensory Needs

Hot weather can make sensory sensitivities more intense.  
Your child may struggle with:

- Sticky skin
- Sunscreen textures
- Certain clothing fabrics
- Sweating
- Bright sunlight
- Humidity
- Sand, grass, or water

Consider:

- ✓ Loose-fitting clothing
- ✓ Soft cotton fabrics
- ✓ Sunglasses if tolerated
- ✓ Hats with familiar textures
- ✓ Shade whenever possible
- ✓ Testing different sunscreen brands

Not all children will tolerate the same products, try different options.



## Expect Changes in Behaviour

Heat can affect mood, sleep, concentration, and emotional regulation.

You may notice:

- ✓ More meltdowns
- ✓ Increased anxiety
- ✓ Greater sensory sensitivity
- ✓ Lower frustration tolerance
- ✓ More emotional outbursts

This doesn't mean anything is wrong.

Sometimes children are simply trying to cope with feeling uncomfortable.



## Protect Sleep Where Possible

Helpful strategies may include:

- Blackout curtains
- Fans (if safe and tolerated)
- Lightweight bedding
- Cooler bedtime clothing
- Keeping bedrooms shaded during the day



# RAINY DAYS HAPPEN...

Let's face it. No matter how carefully you've planned the school holidays, at some point the weather is going to have other ideas.



The park is rained off.  
The picnic gets cancelled.  
The paddling pool stays in the shed.



And suddenly everyone is stuck indoors wondering what to do next. But rainy days don't have to mean ruined days.

In fact, for some children with additional needs, a quieter day at home can be exactly what they need.

Remember:

You do not need to become an entertainer, activities coordinator, chef, referee, and magician all at the same time.

Sometimes a simple day is more than enough.

## Rainy Day Ideas

### Create a Den

Grab some blankets, cushions, and chairs and create a cosy hideaway.

Perfect for:

- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Watching films
- ✓ Quiet time
- ✓ Sensory breaks



### Indoor Treasure Hunt

Hide favourite toys or treats around the house and create clues or picture prompts.

You can make it as simple or as elaborate as your energy levels allow.



### Bring the Outdoors In

Try:

- Nature documentaries
- Bird watching from a window
- Growing cress
- Drawing rain pictures
- Listening to rainfall sounds

Sometimes simply watching the weather can be calming.



### Kitchen Adventures

If your child enjoys helping:

- Bake simple cakes
- Decorate biscuits
- Make pizzas
- Create funny sandwiches

And if things get messy? That's what cleaning products are for.



# SUPPORTING SIBLINGS

**The school holidays can bring additional challenges for siblings too.**



While one child may need extra support, predictability, supervision, or help regulating emotions, siblings may also be navigating changes to routine, disappointment when plans change, or feelings that can be difficult to express.

Many parent carers carry a huge amount of guilt during the holidays, worrying that they are not spending enough time with each child individually, not meeting everyone's needs equally, or not creating enough opportunities for siblings.

But the reality is this:

**You cannot split yourself into two (or three, or four) people.**

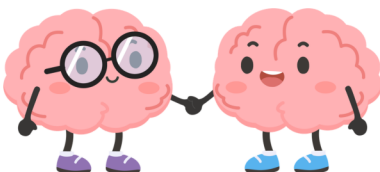
No parent can meet every child's needs perfectly, all of the time.

Parent carers are often balancing appointments, sensory needs, meltdowns, communication differences, additional supervision, medication routines, sleep difficulties, and the everyday demands of family life. That is a lot for one person to carry.

It is okay to acknowledge that some days are about meeting the most urgent needs rather than creating perfect balance.

Try where possible to:

- ✓ Spend individual time with each child, even if it is only 10 minutes
- ✓ Acknowledge their feelings and frustrations
- ✓ Celebrate their achievements and interests
- ✓ Involve them in family decisions where appropriate
- ✓ Avoid placing them in a caring or parenting role
- ✓ Create opportunities for them to have their own experiences and identity



# QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

**Children often remember how they felt more than how much time they received.**



- A ten-minute chat before bed.
- A trip to the shop together.
- Watching their favourite programme side by side.
- Sharing an ice cream.

These moments can be just as meaningful as a full day out.  
Don't underestimate the value of small connections.

## **Let Go of the Comparison Trap**

It can be easy to compare what your children are getting from you.

But children are different.

Their needs are different.

Their personalities are different.

Fair does not always mean equal.

Sometimes one child needs more support today.

Tomorrow it may be another child's turn.

Families are constantly adjusting and responding to changing needs.

**That isn't failure—it's parenting.**



# WHEN THINGS DON'T GO TO PLAN



## Because sometimes they won't.

The day out gets cancelled.  
The child refuses to leave the house.  
The meltdown happens.  
Everyone ends up upset.

Try asking:  
What does success look like today?

Sometimes success is:

- Nobody got hurt
- We regulated together
- We tried
- We made it through

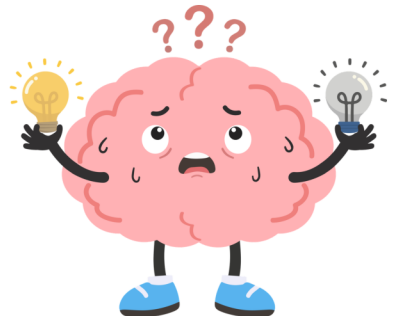
That's enough.

## Forced fun, ain't fun.

As parent carers, it can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking:

- "We've paid for it now."
- "We can't let the siblings down."
- "Everyone else is doing things."
- "We've come all this way."
- "We need to make memories."
- "The children should enjoy this."

But sometimes, despite our best intentions, a day out simply isn't working. And that's okay.



If forcing the situation is likely to lead to:

- Distress
- Meltdowns
- Anxiety
- Conflict
- Exhaustion



Ask yourself:  
Is this still worth it?

Sometimes the bravest thing we can do is change the plan.  
Going home isn't giving up.  
Leaving early isn't failing.  
Choosing a quieter option isn't letting anyone down.  
It is responding to what your family needs in that moment.

# STOP STRIVING FOR PERFECT BALANCE

You have permission to stop striving for perfect balance.

You have permission to accept that some days one child may need more of you than another.

You have permission to recognise that meeting complex needs takes time and energy.

You have permission to be one person doing the best they can.

Your children do not need a perfect parent who can be everything to everyone.

They need a parent who loves them, cares for them, and keeps showing up—even on the difficult days.

And from what you've read so far, that's exactly what you're doing.

Remember:

Siblings don't need equal time : They need meaningful time.

And parent carers don't need to be superheroes, they need compassion too.

# WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD HAS A MELTDOWN IN PUBLIC



First things first:

**You are not a bad parent.**

A meltdown is not the result of poor parenting, a child being naughty, or you doing something wrong.

For many children with additional needs, a meltdown is a sign that they have become overwhelmed and their nervous system can no longer cope with the demands being placed upon it.

It is not a choice.

It is not attention-seeking.

It is distress.

And while public meltdowns can feel incredibly isolating and embarrassing, they are far more common than you might think.

## Stay as Calm as You Can

STEP  
1

Your child will often look to you for cues about whether they are safe. Take a slow breath

Remind yourself:

"My child is having a hard time, not giving me a hard time."

## Reduce Demands

STEP  
2

During a meltdown, your child's thinking brain may be temporarily offline. This means they may struggle to:

- Follow instructions
- Answer questions
- Make decisions
- Explain what is wrong

Keep communication simple.



### **Consider the Environment**

#### **STEP 3**

Ask yourself:

Could something in the environment be contributing?

- Noise
- Crowds
- Bright lights

If possible, move to a quieter space where your child can begin to regulate.

### **Focus on Safety**

#### **STEP 4**

If your child is at risk of hurting themselves, running away, or becoming unsafe:

- Move nearby objects if possible
- Stay close
- Keep yourself safe too

Every child is different.

Trust your knowledge of your child.

### **Ignore the Audience**

#### **STEP 5**

This can be one of the hardest parts.

People may stare.

They may judge.

They may offer unhelpful advice.

They may misunderstand what they are seeing.

#### **Remember:**

Those people do not know your child.

They do not know your journey.


They do not know what happened five minutes ago or what challenges your family faces every day.

Their opinions do not matter in this moment.

Your child does.

# AFTER THE MELTDOWN

When everyone is calm, it can be helpful to think about:

- 
- What happened before the meltdown?
  - Were there any warning signs?
  - What helped?
  - What might we do differently next time?



This isn't about blame.

It's about understanding.

Every meltdown teaches us something.

## **A Message for you**

If your child has a meltdown in public, you may feel:

- Embarrassed
- Frustrated
- Upset
- Exhausted
- Judged
- Like everyone is looking at you

## **PLEASE REMEMBER:**

**You do not need to apologise for your child's distress.**

**You do not need to explain your child's diagnosis to strangers.**

**You do not need to earn understanding from other people.**

**You are supporting a child through one of their hardest moments.**

**That is enough.**

**Meltdowns are not a measure of your parenting.**

**Sometimes the bravest thing a parent carer does all day is stay calm while helping their child through a moment that feels impossible.**

# HANDLING UNHELPFUL COMMENTS

## **Most parent carers have experienced it.**

You're doing your best to support your child when someone offers an opinion, judgement, or piece of advice that feels anything but helpful.

Sometimes the comments come from strangers.  
Sometimes they come from friends or family members.

And sometimes they come from people who genuinely mean well but don't understand your child's needs or your family's circumstances.

You may hear things like:

- "They just need more discipline."
- "They don't look autistic."
- "In my day, children behaved."
- "You should make them do it."
- "They'll grow out of it."
- "Have you tried taking their tablet away?"
- "They seem fine to me."

Comments like these can leave parent carers feeling frustrated, upset, judged, or misunderstood.

## **You Don't Owe Anyone an Explanation**

One of the hardest lessons many parent carers learn is that not every comment requires a response.

- You do not need to educate every stranger.
- You do not need to justify your parenting.
- You do not need to explain your child's diagnosis, needs, or behaviours to make other people comfortable.

Sometimes protecting your own peace is more important.

***Unless they're offering childcare, a hot drink, or a winning lottery ticket, you're allowed to ignore their opinion.***

# LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Parent carers often become everyone's support system.  
But you matter too.

Ask yourself:  
What helps me recharge?

Maybe it's:

- A hot drink in peace
- Reading
- Walking
- Music
- Gardening
- A phone call with a friend
- Five minutes alone in the car

You don't need hours.  
Sometimes five minutes can make a difference.

## BUILDING YOUR SCHOOL HOLIDAYS SUPPORT TEAM

**Think about who is in your corner.**

This could include:

- Family members
- Friends
- Other parent carers
- Support groups
- Professionals
- Your wellbeing practitioner

You don't have to carry everything  
alone.

Even a text saying:  
"Today has been hard."  
can help lighten the load.



### Permission Slips for Parent Carers

You have permission to:

- ✓ Say no to invitations
- ✓ Leave early
- ✓ Change your mind
- ✓ Cancel plans
- ✓ Stay home
- ✓ Ask for help
- ✓ Order takeaway
- ✓ Use screens when needed
- ✓ Prioritise regulation over expectations
- ✓ Do what works for your family

# WHEN YOU'RE RUNNING ON EMPTY

The school holidays can be wonderful.

They can also be exhausting.

For many parent carers, the holidays mean weeks without the usual routines, fewer opportunities for a break, increased caring responsibilities, additional planning, disrupted sleep, and the constant balancing act of trying to meet everyone's needs.

Sometimes, without even realising it, we keep going long after our tank is empty.

We tell ourselves:

- "I'll rest when things calm down."
- "I'll have a break next week."
- "Everyone else needs me first."
- "I just need to get through today."

And before we know it, we're running on fumes.

You are not just a parent carer.

You are a person.

A person with needs, feelings, limits, and a wellbeing that matters too. Your family needs you—but they don't need you exhausted, burnt out, and running on empty.

## **If You're Struggling**

Please remember:

You do not have to earn rest.

You do not have to reach breaking point before asking for support.

You do not have to carry everything alone.

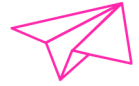
Sometimes strength looks like recognising that you need help.

*If your child handed you a biscuit that was 98% crumbs, you'd probably agree it wasn't functioning at full capacity.*

*The same applies to parent carers running on 2% energy.*



## A Final Reminder



The school holidays don't have to be perfect.

Some days will be filled with laughter, some with challenges, and most will be somewhere in between.



Be gentle with yourself.

Celebrate the small wins.

Let go of the pressure to do it all.

And remember:  
You are doing better than you think.



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