

Fireworks Strategies

Dr. Siobhan Timmins

Every aspect of a Firework display was uncomfortable for my son, Mark, from the unexpected noises and bright lights to the crowds and their random 'oohs' and 'aahs' as well as the unusual foods offered for family and friends to eat outdoors while watching the display. He wanted to be involved, the whole evening was just too overwhelming for him

Strategies for Fireworks Night

- Trying to dampen down noise by shutting windows and blinds as well as curtains early on in the evening.
- The use of in-ear headphones with no music playing dampened down any early background noise, supplemented by his favorite music when the noise became louder. In the early years this was really only necessary for one night but over recent years it became more difficult as the fireworks go on for so many nights.
- Many children will happily put on a head set and play computer games which may be a helpful distraction (lots of explosions in the game disguised outside noise).
- At peak noise having a shower with the jet on full was a short-term solution. Bathrooms may often be places where outdoor noise is less audible (small windows, tiled walls)
- Sharing social information necessary to make sense of what was going on. (Social Story on Bonfire Night as part of a series of Stories on 'Traditions').
- Acknowledgment and validation of the physical discomfort he experienced with loud and sudden noises. We were able to tell him he was not alone and that many children and adults found them uncomfortable as well as millions of dogs, cats and horses, all of whom shared his supersensitive hearing.
- We began celebrating the evening on a very small scale in an autism friendly way. No visitors, just the immediate family. We would gather after a familiar and comfortable supper in a bedroom which overlooked the park surrounding Colchester Castle where a public display was put on every year. Although several miles away we had a good view of the fireworks without any crowds or noise and the added bonus of being able to leave at any point and go to familiar and safe surroundings.
- Each of my 3 boys chose their favorite firework and tried to remember what color it was and what pattern it made. When the display finished we headed downstairs to put the favorite firework on black paper using colored chalks or glitter pens. The therapeutic use of coloring was so evident here! All of Mark's favorite fireworks were blue of course.
- The next morning each boy had one or more pictures of the display to take to school to facilitate a conversation on Firework night without even having been outside.

- As years went by Mark expressed an interest in going to a display as his peers talked about the one in Colchester Castle Park at school. On the day of the display in Castle Park, we walked to our local park. From the top of a hill we could stand and watch the Fireworks in the distance. We stood as a small family group and there were no people around us.
- Over time we encouraged Mark to use ear defenders and come with us to the main public display, standing right at the back with quick and easy access to the exit and staying for a pre-agreed very short time. There was no social pressure on him at all as the crowd was a distance away.
- Gradually over the years we extended the time but always allowed him to leave when uncomfortable. So that the other boys still got to enjoy the fireworks one of us would stay with them.
- Another strategy that has been useful for us and other children has been using the firework displays that are available on You-Tube and displaying them on the biggest screen in the house on mute. Many children enjoy the visuals without the noise or crowds in their own familiar environment. Some will enjoy a favorite soundtrack as background music too.
- Nowadays Mark's responsibility is to look after the dog (who since her vision began to fail is now frightened by fireworks) – they are a team!
- Recently silent displays are being run in consideration of those with sensory differences, PTSD and domestic animals. These may not be local and are rarely completely silent, and usually always have a crowd of people so choose carefully what will suit your child.