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Balancing Joy, Boundaries, and Belonging: The Ethical Role of DSPs in Holiday Celebration and Connection

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The holiday season is a time many look forward to—filled with moments of joy, togetherness, and the celebration of personal and cultural traditions. One of the greatest aspects of the holidays is that they provide the opportunity to have dedicated time to connect with family and friends. However, it is also a period where emotions can run high, and routines often shift, creating unique challenges. Additionally, it is not always a joyous time for everyone. All these dichotomies can be especially true for individuals with developmental disabilities (I/DD), whose experiences of the holidays may differ greatly. The holiday season can intensify feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion for individuals with I/DD, mental health challenges, dual diagnoses, or complex family dynamics. It is in these circumstances, where balancing the festive joy of the holidays, and providing dynamic

professional and ethical direct support becomes especially important.

Direct support professionals (DSPs) play an essential role in ensuring the holiday season is supportive and inclusive for all individuals, particularly those facing unique challenges. They can be the people that fill in when family checks out. They can be the connecting factor that helps a person find transportation to their family’s house for a holiday meal. They can be the resource to make sure a person’s home is decorated according to their cultural traditions. The role of the DSP during the holidays is one of many hats! The question then arises for the DSP: Which hat am I wearing today? Are DSPs “friends,” “family,” or “friendly and family-like professionals?” In this article, we will explore how DSPs play a unique role, balancing compassion and professionalism while maintaining ethical boundaries. During the holiday season, the biggest gift a DSP can offer is providing the individuals they support with the tools they need to feel a sense of belonging, joy, and independence.

Understanding the Holiday Season’s Impact on People with I/DD

To understand how best DSPs can support a person during the holiday season, first we need to consider what this time of year may feel like, and how it might impact a person living with I/DD specifically. While some individuals may find comfort in familiar traditions, for others, the changes in routine, family dynamics, and heightened expectations can result in emotional upheaval. Holiday celebrations may highlight feelings of exclusion, grief, or overwhelm. People may exhibit heightened behaviors such as emotional outbursts, aggression, anxiety, or withdrawal, and those who are unable to participate in family celebrations may feel isolated. Others may be living in settings where the people around them or the support staff celebrate a holiday not relevant to their cultural background, abstain from celebrating, or coerce people to celebrate in a traditional mainstream manner. All these situations have the potential to leave a person feeling othered and like they don’t belong.

In addition to the disruption of routine, there is also a decrease in daylight and the essential vitamin D (with the potential increase for Seasonal Affective Disorder, aka “SAD”), colder temperatures, and even less time for outdoor activities and exercise. The winter holidays can also increase stress due to potential sensory overload from bright lights and cluttered decorations, as well as crowded public spaces. For some people with disabilities, socializing can be emotionally difficult and even physically tiring. All these obstacles and hindrances require thoughtful planning and accommodations to ensure full participation and inclusion. The holidays are most certainly not a time for “winging it!”

Balancing Boundaries

DSPs often serve as the steady presence in the lives of the people they support, offering continuity and routine. During the holidays, the responsibility of DSPs grows, as they must not only maintain routine, but also provide person-centered support tailored to each individual’s emotional and psychological needs. DSPs must balance being compassionate and understanding while still adhering to a professional [NADSP code of ethics](#).

Continuum of Professional Behavior



Figure 1

Despite the close, supportive relationships DSPs often build with the people they support, it is essential to remember that DSPs are neither friends nor family. Their role is a professional one, and maintaining clear boundaries ensures that the relationship remains person-centered and focused on supporting the wants, needs, and preferences of the individual.

The [Continuum of Professional Behavior](#), figure 1, provides a visual framework for understanding the sweet spot for DSP boundaries; interactions should aim to stay within therapeutic and professional ‘In the zone’ parameters. This ensures that safety, respect, and support remain central to the relationship. Any other paid professional like a nurse, a lawyer, a postal worker, etc. would have clear boundaries when it comes to the holidays. Your local cashier at the grocery store may know you by name, and may even wish you a happy holiday (‘In the zone’), as you purchase your Thanksgiving turkey, but they are not inviting you over for dinner (over-involvement.) A competent and ethical DSP will aim to provide supports providing healthy interdependence (see figure 2).

In contrast to these professionals, DSPs can often be found working closely alongside of people in their homes, in intimate personal situations, or with their family-members. The holiday season creates circumstances that blur the lines between professional boundaries, as the desire to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere often leads to feelings of “family-like” or “friend-like” care. However, DSPs can still foster a warm and celebratory environment without crossing the line. It’s important to remain grounded in the professional role while demonstrating warmth, compassion, and care. DSPs must understand that providing this type of kindhearted support does not mean replacing or replicating family relationships, but rather providing a sense of belonging within a professional context. Providing opportunities for naturally occurring relationships, community engagement, and discovery opportunities for building social reciprocity.

The NADSP Code of Ethics provide guidance for maintaining professionalism during such intense times. Standards like person-centered support, integrity, self-determination, respect, and advocacy help guide DSPs in offering warmth without crossing professional boundaries. These guidelines ensure that DSPs can support the people they serve without doing harm by posing as friends, or pseudo-family members. Consider for example, a DSP who is supporting a person whose family isn’t available for the holidays. They are left to stay home alone while their housemates go off to spend the holiday with their respective families. As a result, the person may feel lonely or rejected. The DSP likely cares for the emotional well-being of the person supported and may even be tempted to invite them to their own home for the holidays. In this situation what is more ethical: To let the person feel lonely and stay in their home alone, or invite them back to the DSPs home to share in the celebration with their family? Perhaps there is a third option: The DSP may facilitate a special celebration with the individual, providing an experience of joy and connection. The DSP can prepare for the holidays, knowing this potential situation might arise and proactively support the person to seek out natural connections in their community, to work on building and maintaining friendships with others, or seeking out culturally relevant gatherings that the person could attend. The DSP must avoid becoming overly

involved, ensuring that the holiday celebration is centered on the individual’s needs, not their own emotional needs. Not only will this protect the DSP’s well-being, but it creates a more sustainable and long-term positive impact for the person they support.

TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES

*NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST



Under-involvement/ Negligent	In the zone/ Friendly but firm	Over-involvement/ Family & Friend-like
Description		
<p>Detached professionals maintain an emotional distance, often not investing in their work or connecting to the people they support. They may show little empathy, be quick to judge or impose personal bias, or avoid building meaningful relationships. This often involves doing only what is explicitly asked without taking initiative or following up.</p>	<p>Professionals demonstrating healthy boundaries may have relationships where there is mutual respect, and the DSP assumes ability and capability. The DSP will step in to provide support, meeting the individual where they are at, working to advocate <i>with</i> the person rather than <i>for</i> them. This DSP can balance keeping a person safe and meeting their more complex social-emotional needs.</p>	<p>Enmeshed professional may often blur their personal boundaries, and there’s often an over-involvement or over-sharing with the person they support. This DSP may conflate their worth with the ability of the person they support, and say things like “Only I can get John to do XYZ,” or “I feel good when John accomplishes his goals.” This DSP may come across as parental, and there may be a one-sided power imbalance.</p>
Impact		
<p>Professionals who are under-involved may impact the people they support and their coworkers negatively. People may feel unsupported, ignored, and challenging behavior may arise from unmet needs. This person may also be quick to call-out.</p>	<p>Professionals who are “In the zone” foster a supportive, stable environment that encourages autonomy, self-determination, and person-centered support. People feel supported and informed to make their own decisions whenever possible. Dignity of risk is also supported.</p>	<p>Professionals who are in enmeshed relationships may be quick to give too much of their emotional energy and can feel burn-out or compassion fatigue. They may be quick to get into power-struggles or have a challenging time setting boundaries. People supported can also become reliant and dependent on their DSP, limiting their autonomy.</p>

Figure 2

Let’s Explore the Roles and Responsibilities of DSPs During the Holidays

- Providing emotional support with sensitivity and empathy**
 The holidays often bring complex emotions. DSPs must recognize and respond to the varying emotional states of the individuals they support. Whether it’s dealing with the absence of family, or the exciting [eustress](#) of giving and receiving gifts, DSPs need to offer sensitive, empathetic support. DSPs can help recognize when an individual is experiencing positive stress, such as excitement before a holiday gathering or

anticipation for a festive activity. Validate the individual's feelings of anticipation or excitement, helping them understand that these feelings are common for all people. Remind them of past times they experienced similar feelings and the positive outcome. Encourage individuals to use positive affirmations to manage their emotions. For example, phrases like "I am excited for this holiday party" or "I can handle this challenge" help frame stress in a positive light. Use calming techniques like deep breathing or grounding exercises to help them manage any overwhelming feelings without diminishing the excitement. Lastly, help individuals to be able to identify and decide when they need to take a break, provide tools like earplugs, or redirection to quiet spaces.

- **Refraining from imposing personal bias**

DSPs must respect each individual's choice of whether and how to celebrate. It is essential not to impose their own holiday preferences but instead to support individuals in engaging with or opting out of holiday activities according to their cultural and personal beliefs. If a DSP is unfamiliar with a particular holiday or tradition, they can ask the person they are supporting to teach them about it, or research the holiday with the person they are supporting. There is no one right way to celebrate, and a lot of holiday traditions are personal. When in doubt, the best practice is to be person-centered, and allow space and tools for the person to self-direct how they like to celebrate.

- **Maintaining consistency and routine**

For many individuals with I/DD, the stability of a routine is comforting. DSPs must balance holiday activities with maintaining routines that reduce stress and promote comfort. This approach ensures that individuals can enjoy the season while retaining the consistency they rely on. Anticipate upcoming changes to the routine by discussing holiday plans with the person you support. DSPs can use a visual schedule to represent both regular routines and special holiday events. This can help individuals with I/DD anticipate changes and understand the flow of the day, reducing anxiety and increasing their sense of control.

- **Encouraging autonomy and informed choice**

One of the most important aspects of DSP work is promoting self-determination. During the holidays, DSPs can support individuals by allowing them to make decisions about how they wish to celebrate. Encouraging autonomy helps individuals feel more in control and connected to the holiday experience. Clearly explain what to expect during holiday festivities, including any changes to routine, such as new people, foods, or traditions. This helps minimize surprises, and reduces stress, and helps people to make decisions about what they want to participate in.

- **Fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion**

DSPs play an essential role in fostering a sense of belonging for individuals with I/DD. This can be achieved by involving them in community events, family celebrations, or activities that align with their interests. For example, DSPs can help individuals participate in local holiday events that resonate with their values, ensuring that they feel connected to the community around them. Create opportunities for individuals to join in holiday activities with others, whether within the group setting or by facilitating community events. Encourage a culture of respect for diversity. Acknowledge and celebrate the unique perspectives and traditions that individuals bring to the holiday experience, fostering an environment where everyone's identity is valued. If the individual doesn't have established family traditions, introduce new, inclusive group rituals that they can take part in. It could be something as simple as lighting candles together, exchanging homemade cards, or participating in a group storytelling activity. These practices help build shared experiences and connections.

- **Adapting celebrations to meet individual needs, abilities, and preferences**
DSPs must adapt holiday activities to ensure accessibility and enjoyment. Some individuals may have sensory sensitivities, requiring modifications to traditional holiday celebrations. This could mean choosing quieter environments, modifying sensory-stimulating activities, or providing accommodations that allow individuals to participate fully in the celebration. Meet the person where they are at—involve individuals in holiday preparations by offering them choices in how they want to celebrate. For example, they could help decorate or select the foods to include in a holiday meal, ensuring they have a personal contribution in the celebration. Sometimes, despite planning, things may not go as expected. It's important to remain flexible and adjust the schedule as needed to meet the emotional and physical needs of the individual.
 - **An example:**
“Christmas is a big holiday for everyone, but it means so much more to/for me. It’s my happy place and the one time my stress is under control. Being able to go to Christmas events is important to me. Last year, my church was having an event called Christmas in the City. Most of the event was outside, but I have temperature-induced seizures brought on by extreme heat or extreme cold. My DSP knew this event was something I had planned to go to all winter and had talked about it for weeks. She never discouraged me not to go, but instead sat down with me, and together we came up with a plan. We purchased hand and feet warmers to put in my gloves and sneakers, and extras in my pockets. Before it was time to leave, she went and heated up the car to make sure I would be warm. Despite the cold temperatures, I was still able to get out into the community and enjoy the Christmas season!”
~ Letisia Comstock-Allcorn, Self-advocate
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Let’s Address Common Ethical Dilemmas for DSPs During the Holiday Season

- **Gift giving and receiving**
Gift exchanges can create ethical dilemmas for DSPs. Gifts can blur the lines of professional boundaries, especially when there is a potential power imbalance in the relationship. Many workplaces, including those in human services, have policies regarding gift-giving and receiving. DSPs should familiarize themselves with these policies to understand what is acceptable, and what could lead to ethical concerns. If the guidelines are unclear, ask a supervisor or HR for clarification. DSPs should remember that their relationships with the individuals they support are professional in nature. While it's important to provide care with warmth and empathy, gift exchanges can complicate this dynamic, potentially leading to feelings of obligation or favoritism, or even exploitation. If a person they support expresses a desire to give a gift, DSPs can kindly explain that, as professionals, they are unable to accept gifts. This can be framed in a way that emphasizes the focus on their role as a support person rather than a personal connection. Instead of giving physical gifts, DSPs can show appreciation through actions such as acknowledging the progress or achievements of the individuals they support, offering kind words, or providing emotional support during the season.
- **Holiday gatherings and invitations**
Attending family gatherings of the individuals they support presents another ethical dilemma. While DSPs may be invited, it's important to weigh the implications of accepting or declining such invitations. Similarly, inviting individuals to celebrate holidays at their homes should be approached with caution to maintain boundaries. Accepting personal invitations could inadvertently create conflicts of interest, or feelings of

favoritism. DSPs should acknowledge that their professional role requires them to maintain impartiality and focus on the person's needs rather than becoming emotionally enmeshed with their family dynamics. If the individual supported is missing family during the holidays, DSPs can help them stay connected, like making holiday cards or zoom-calls to family members.

- **Managing personal emotions and boundaries**

The holiday season can evoke strong emotions, both positive and negative. DSPs must be mindful of their own emotional reactions and ensure they maintain clear professional boundaries. To avoid burnout and emotional fatigue, DSPs can engage in reflective practices and set limits on emotional availability while staying present and supportive. If a DSP feels drained, they should be honest with themselves and their team about their capacity to provide support. It's okay to communicate with your supervisor, when you need a break, or to ask for assistance from another staff member to avoid taking on more than you can handle. It's also essential for DSPs to balance showing compassion and empathy, but not to the point where they become overly attached, or overly responsible for the emotions of people they support, or even their coworkers. This can be achieved by listening to someone's frustrations or challenges, but then allow that person to process and manage those emotions themselves. Lastly, but importantly, DSPs should incorporate self-care into their daily routine to manage the emotional demands of the holiday season. This can include activities like reading, taking walks, getting enough quality sleep, practicing yoga, or spending time with friends and family outside of work. After particularly emotionally draining situations or shifts, DSPs should take time to decompress. This could involve debriefing with a colleague or supervisor, or simply taking a few minutes to step away and breathe.

Practical Strategies for DSPs to Maintain Ethics and Professionalism During Holidays

- **Communicating boundaries clearly and respectfully**

Proactively communicate professional boundaries with clarity, respect, and compassion. This will help ensure those supported understand the nature of their relationship with their DSP and can still feel safe and supported. Stay consistent in your approach to working with everyone, so that you don't have to justify blurry boundaries with one person over another.

- **Leaning on the NADSP Code of Ethics for guidance**

The [NADSP Code of Ethics](#) serves as a valuable resource for DSPs to revisit during the holiday season. These ethical principles offer guidance and reassurance during situations where DSPs are not sure of the right approach.

- **Seeking support and reflection from supervisors and coworkers**

DSPs should seek support from supervisors or coworkers when faced with challenging situations. When in doubt, speak with someone about the situation while maintaining confidentiality. When working with people, circumstances are rarely strictly black or white; instead, we often find ourselves operating in the gray spaces. It is better to ask for support than to go rogue.

The role of DSPs during the holiday season is complex and vital. DSPs must balance warmth, compassion, and professionalism, especially when supporting individuals with I/DD. By maintaining ethical boundaries, DSPs can provide the most effective support, fostering a sense of belonging, autonomy, and joy for the individuals they support. With these tools, DSPs can navigate the holidays with empathy, professionalism, and care, helping to foster an environment where individuals feel truly seen, valued, and connected. We wish everyone a very happy and joy-filled holiday season!

About the author

Rachel Jacob (she/her) holds a Bachelor of Science in Visual Arts Education from SUNY New Paltz, and a Master of Public Administration from Marist College. Rachel began her career as a Direct Support Professional, progressing to a Day Habilitation Manager. Her dedication led her to HR/Staff Development, where she helped establish and facilitate a local cohort for the NADSP credentialing program. Currently, she contributes to the Communications and Marketing team at the Regional Centers for Workforce Development in New York. Additionally, she recently took on the role of New York State, SUNY E-Badge Credentialing Coordinator at NADSP. Her professional philosophy is, "Make it passionate, make it purposeful, make it personal."

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