December at School

NHS

Lowering demands to protect linguistic energy

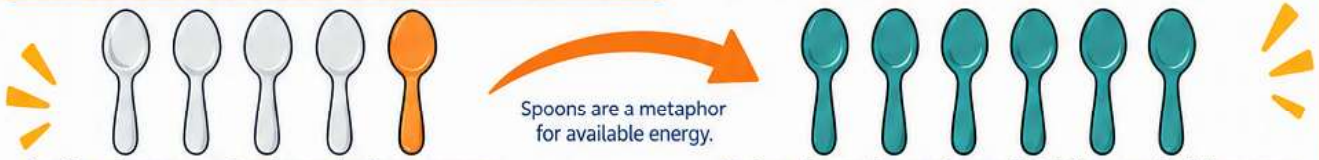
Balancing predictability and flexibility through needs-led support.

Small adjustments make a big difference.



Linguistic energy & cognitive flexibility

Adapting to change uses executive-function energy.



Festive changes + extra demands: fewer spoons

Reduce demands + rest + predictability: replenish spoons

Hidden Energy Drains

Sensory demands:
Flashing fairy lights, tinsel, unfamiliar smells and loud concert rehearsals.

Routine disruption:
Off-timetable days, indoor trees, assemblies and rearranged classrooms.

Weather & clothing:
Cold weather adds extra steps. Being told to wear coats, gloves or itchy festive jumpers can feel like a loss of autonomy.

Reduce linguistic demands

Use declarative language

Replace direct instructions with simple observations.
Instead of "Put your coat on now", try "It is freezing outside today, and your red coat is by the door."
Instead of "Go to the hall", try "I notice the rehearsal is starting in the hall."

Offer genuine autonomy and choices

"Do you want to wear your coat or hoodie?"
"Do you want to sit on the floor or a chair in the hall?"
Only offer choices that are genuinely available.

Depersonalise expectations

"School starts at 9am" instead of "I need you to get in the car now."

Say less — show more

Use simple, concise verbal instructions. During high-demand periods, you may need to remove verbal demands completely and use visuals or gestures instead.

Open-ended warnings

"The music starts around 10, whenever you're ready to join."

Predictability & clarity

Supporting rigid processing styles

At home

- Avoid extra changes or surprises when school becomes less predictable before Christmas.
- Give 30–60 minutes of quiet, predictable downtime immediately after school, before questions or demands.
- Keep familiar comforts: the same snack, sofa spot and favourite calming activity.
- Introduce decorations gradually, or keep the child's bedroom free of seasonal changes as an unchanged safe space.

At school

- Keep arrival greetings, lining up, cloakroom routines and end-of-day pack-up the same each day.
- Change only one thing at a time wherever possible.

Engagement without pressure

Supporting novelty seeking

- Keep novelty optional: offer open invitations rather than fixed schedules to reduce linguistic overload.
- Offer behind-the-scenes roles: help with lights, hand out programmes or set up beforehand, without spotlight pressure.
- Use passive invitations: leave festive crafts or themed books accessible. Let curiosity lead, without a verbal invitation.
- Frame tasks as experiments or games: use low-stakes play, mysteries or gentle races rather than mandatory assignments. "I wonder how fast this glue dries" instead of "Please glue this piece down."
- Incorporate interests: connect seasonal themes and schedule changes to the child's existing passions.

Reduce pressure. Protect energy. Keep connection.

Trafford Speech & Language Therapy