

Travel Tips Amy Lennard Goehner, TIME Magazine 2009

Kids with autism require as much routine and structure as possible. By definition, vacations are a break from routine activities.... I've compiled this list of tips for parents who might be ready to hit the beach!

Fear of an Unknown Destination

Tip: "Prior to leaving, the key is to simulate the vacation as closely as possible in as many ways as possible," says Daniel Openden, clinical services director of the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center in Phoenix. "Parents can show their children pictures or movies of the location or search the Internet together. Teach your child what to expect before you go." Kim Wolf, parent of 11-year-old Jack, prepares a picture book about the trip two weeks in advance. "We include where we are going, who is going, what we are going to do. We also make a calendar so we can count down the days until the trip." Also, once a destination is established, it helps to return to the same vacation spot or to videotape family trips and replay them over the course of the year.

Theme Parks

Tip: Disney World and many theme parks have special passes or wristbands for families whose children have disabilities, including autism. The passes allow your family entrance at the front of every entry gate, bypassing long lines, which are a huge source of distress. Call in advance and ask for special-guest relations. Trisha Kayden, who recently took her 9-year-old daughter to Disney World, says, "Getting to go first on everything is the only perk to autism!"

"For a young child, a very family-friendly theme park can be an excellent choice," says Dr. Sandra Harris, executive director of Rutgers University's Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center. "You can stay in one hotel for the whole trip. They are often very accommodating to families of children who have a disability and tend to be forgiving of tantrums, anxiety and other behaviors that many young children display." As for loud theme park noises (sensory issues are common to kids with autism), take earplugs or headphones to mute the sound or visit during off-peak weeks, when crowds are smaller.

Traveling by Plane

Tip: From airport security to boredom on the flight, plane travel can be a nightmare. With security, do a practice run. Marcy Mullins called her local airport in Cincinnati and explained that her 6-year-old son Marcel had never flown before. In an airport first, airport personnel allowed Marcy and her son to simulate what would happen when he went through security, step by step. The Columbus airport was similarly accommodating. If you can't do a practice run, at the very least, alert security about your child's issues.

Once you're on the plane, have a plan to pass the time. "On our last excursion to Asia (my husband was there already) with three kids under 8, including one with autism, I prepared like a neurotic woman on steroids," says Megan Browne. "Packed in each child's rolling suitcase I had prepared gifts wrapped in tissue paper and had enough for every hour on the plane for each kid. The gift included crayons, a new coloring book, Legos, PlayDough, a new DVD. They looked forward to each hour so they could open a new thing to play." Also, request bulkhead seats in advance and

explain why you need them, and take gum or hard candy, particularly if your child is nonverbal and can't tell you his ears need popping.

Even with good prep, travel by airplane is just not feasible for some kids. "With the advent of heightened airport security, I can no longer fly with Morgan," says Pam Homsher. "I can just picture them asking to take her shoes off after she's waited in line for an hour. She has stellar hand-eye coordination and has killer aim with a Nike."

Hotels

Tip: "Start small," says Christine Bakter. "Try one night in a nearby hotel or plan an overnight at a friend's house before attempting a longer vacation. You may have to do this several times." It's also important to call ahead and request adjoining rooms or anything special you might need. In addition to taking along your child's familiar bedding and blankets, one mom even asks for extra bed padding, as her son has occasional overnight accidents. Requesting a room at the end of a floor helps ease any worries about noise pollution. It may also be worth the extra money to stay in a rental or condo so you can prepare your own food.

Safety

Tip: "Be sure your child is wearing identification," says Dr. Harris. "You can pin it to the back of his shirt or attach it to his shoelaces if he is the kind of child who won't tolerate wearing it. Include the child's name and diagnosis and your cell number and anything that a person might need to keep him safe and calm until you are reunited." Also, carry a recent photo of your child to show police in case your he or she wanders off.