

Traveling with Autism? Here are Some Tips

April is Autism Awareness Month and a great time to plan a summer vacation, especially now that the travel industry welcomes special needs families. Today, parents traveling with a loved one who has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have more options.

“One in 59 children has an autism spectrum disorder,” says Diane Adreon, Ed.D, associate director of the Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of Miami - Nova Southeastern University campus. “In the last 20 years, the definition of autism has broadened and community awareness has increased. In this age of neurodiversity, we are more likely to encounter individuals with ASD and other differences. Our communities need to become comfortable interacting with people with ASD and partner with them by being empathic, welcoming, and learning strategies to successfully support them and their families.”

Now, the travel industry is responding to special needs travelers more than ever before. “(CARD) not only connect parents with resources, we partner with the community to help them be more inclusive of people with autism,” says Dr. Adreon, who has a son with autism. The following tips and trends will help families venture forth.

The power of planning

Travel is less stressful for people with ASD if they know what to expect. Discuss your plans ahead of time by watching videos or sharing pictures of your destination and mode of transportation. Use a calendar to help count down the days before

departure. Consider a trial run by staying one night at a local hotel or friend's house. Contemplating a theme park vacation? Visit during off-peak periods, when it's less crowded.

For some children with autism, air travel is too much to handle. If your child tolerates flying, print or download the MIAair social narrative and travel checklist, created by CARD and Miami International Airport. Available in English and Spanish, it explains the airport and flight experience, step by step. Three times a year, MIAair's "dress rehearsal" program allows special needs travelers to acclimate to the airport and prepare for future flights.

Ask for help

If flying, tell the airline in advance that your passenger has special needs. You may want to request bulkhead seats, advance boarding or a special meal. When booking hotels, reserve a room at the quieter, less occupied end of a hallway. Bring a familiar blanket from home and if your child has nighttime accidents, request extra bedding from the front desk. Some hotels also set aside rooms for people with chemical sensitivities. If your spouse or partner can't accompany you, bring a compassionate relative or friend.

Ready to hit the high seas? If you're not using a company that specifically caters to families like yours, ask if the resort, hotel, airline, cruise ship or attraction has a special needs policy. Dr. Adreon, along with other autism leaders across the country, serves on the autism advisory board at Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines and helped the company develop ways to accommodate people with ASD.

Pack wisely

Bring a few favorite activities, reinforcement rewards for good behavior, and a

sensory toy like a stress ball or a weighted blanket to reduce anxiety. To ease your own anxiety, make your child a safety bracelet or name tag with his or her name, diagnosis, and your cell phone number. Pack ear plugs or noise canceling headphones to address noise sensitivities. Unfamiliar foods may exacerbate symptoms, so bring plenty of snacks. If you anticipate toileting troubles, pack a clean change of clothes and locate rest areas or airport bathrooms in advance.

Stress-busting strategies

Noisy, overcrowded airports and similar settings can be overwhelming. Have a Plan B for distracted or stressful situations. Some individuals respond to calming cues such as “Take a breath” or strategies such as “First this, then this” when choosing activities the whole family will enjoy.

Several airports now offer “sensory rooms” — quiet havens for adults and children with autism. (A sensory room opens at Miami International Airport on April 19, 2019.) And remember, everyone behaves better if they’re well-fed, well-rested, and get regular bathroom breaks.

Tap into tech

Assistive technology not only passes the time en route, it familiarizes your family member with travel experiences before leaving home. Some apps make it much easier for non-verbal individuals to communicate. If you’re flying, consider downloading the MIA social narrative on your iPad. “You can use it no matter where you’re traveling to or from,” Dr. Adreon explains.

Home away from home

“Staying at the same place every year comforts people with ASD. It also helps to rent a place with a kitchen, since they tend to be particular about food,” Dr. Adreon

says. The type of tailored experience Dr. Adreon describes inspired VillaKey vacation rentals. "My dad had Asperger's, so we rarely took family vacations," says owner Alice Horn. "Staying in a small hotel room with his two noisy little girls was tough for him."

Horn worked with Michael Alessandri, Ph.D., CARD's executive director, and his staff to identify vacation rentals that met the needs of families like hers. Villa Key's autism-friendly Orlando-area vacation homes feature quiet locations, soft lighting, neutral colors, fragrance-free cleaning products, smooth linens, safety locks on windows and doors, and security fences around pools. Service pets are welcome, too. With the Center's help, Horn also developed a downloadable vacation rental social story and travel checklist.

"Families are overwhelmingly appreciative for a travel option that makes sense for them," Horn says.

Attitude is everything

When packing your bags, don't forget to bring your sense of humor.

"No matter how much you prepare, autism behaviors cannot always be helped," says Dr. Adreon. "People with autism are doing the best they can. The more than 12,000 South Florida families registered with our Center are doing the best they can to help their children live successfully with autism. When a parent has the courage to say, 'My child has autism', it expands awareness and helps communities understand that autism is not a statement about parenting."

Travel enhances our understanding of others and the world around us. The same is true of families determined to travel, despite challenges. "By educating our employees and the public to the needs of these families, we're benefiting the families

and building autism awareness,” says Horn.

*If your family member has autism, you can find resources at the University of Miami’s Mailman Center for Child Development or the University of Miami-NSU CARD. **For appointments and information call 305-243-6831.***

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Autism-friendly Travel Experiences

Disney World theme parks offer a Disability Access Service to eliminate long waits in line. Other resources include dietary accommodations, companion restrooms, break areas, advanced ticket purchases, and a Guide for Guests with Cognitive Disabilities. Another guide describes each attraction’s level of noise or darkness, flashing lights, and scents.

Aquatica Orlando, the first Certified Autism Center water park, provides staff-wide ASD sensitivity and awareness training. Families receive information about attractions, experiences, and in-park accommodations to help plan their visit. A Ride Accessibility Program keeps kids safe, while allowing everyone to participate. When it’s time to regroup, families appreciate the theme park’s quiet room and low sensory area.

VacationKids trip planners have a certified autism specialist who helps families organize theme park, cruise, and adventure destination trips.

Outfitter Selkie Adaptive Paddle hosts kayaking, canoeing, and paddleboard trips out of Southwest Florida. Adaptive equipment, stable boats, and modified teaching techniques welcome people of all abilities.

Florida Disabled Outdoors Association's database of inclusive recreational opportunities helps families find fun, accessible activities throughout the state. Information is available in English and Spanish.

Autism on the Seas offers specialized programming on several cruise lines. Trained staff expedite boarding and the security/check-in process. They accompany families during activities and meals, address dietary concerns, and reserve entertainment seating. The helpers even arrange respite sessions so parents can relax and recharge.