Traveling With a Child With Autism

It's no surprise that parents of children on the autism spectrum tend to avoid travel. Negotiating airports, cruise ships and amusement parks can be taxing for any family — let alone parents of children with autism, who are particularly sensitive to how strangers and travel workers will respond to their child's needs and behaviors.

But travel can bring unique benefits to families coping with these issues, and if you follow some simple steps you can make traveling an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. Here are five reasons why families with autism should take on adventure together.

Transitions of travel. Exposing your child with autism to new situations and environments can help him or her acquire much needed life skills. Children with autism sometimes struggle with transitions and changes in their routines. This is, of course, the essence of travel. Becoming more tolerant of new things and developing tools to overcome potential meltdowns are beneficial in everyday life as well.

Learn by doing. Travel can complement the information that your child is learning about in school. Children with autism typically learn more effectively by exploring with their senses than they do from reading books. Take your child to historical sites, zoos, hands-on museums, or ethnic restaurants, so he or she can absorb even more about topics introduced in a school setting.

Family bonding. Everyday life is hectic for most families, and is especially so for families on the autism spectrum. Running around between doctor appointments, therapy sessions and after-school activities hardly leaves enough time for homework, let alone downtime for family bonding. Travel provides a great opportunity for quality time to get to know your child and to talk to him or her without being rushed. It also creates priceless memories as you share in new experiences together.

Coping skills. Travel can help everyone in the family — parents, children with autism and their siblings — face and cope with strangers' (sometimes negative) reactions and responses to autistic behaviors. Many parents admit that they dread being stared at, pointed to, or even berated when their children act unpredictably in public. Because of this, parents often take their kids out as little as possible. Ironically, the more frequent the exposure to the public's (sometimes painful) comments and reactions, the better you learn as an individual and as a family to deal with them in a calm, constructive manner.

Raise autism awareness. By traveling with your child with special needs, you will inadvertently help others around you understand the many different facets and challenges of autism. Currently, 1 in 88 children is diagnosed with autism. That's more than the number of children diagnosed with cancer, diabetes, Down syndrome and AIDS combined. A more knowledgeable, tolerant and understanding society is a good thing as the autism community grows. ■

Information for this handout was provided by Margalit Sturm Francus, travel advisor for Generation Rescue, a national organization that provides information and treatment to families affected by autism spectrum disorders. Visit www.generationrescue.org.

Tips for Travel

Courtesy of Earl Campazzi, MD, MPH, and posted on www.autismspeaks.org, here are some tips for enjoyable and safe travel with your child on the autism spectrum:

1. Teach your child with ASD about the trip in as many ways as you can, starting a couple weeks beforehand. A practice trip to the local airport may help. See if you can go through security to familiarize your child. Show him pictures of the destination and the inside of a plane.
2. Practice waiting (a skill key to modern travel) with a favorite toy as a reward after a few minutes. Then gradually increase the time *(tip courtesy of Chantal Sicile-Kira, sheknows.com)*.
3. For safety, carry a recent photo of your child. Pin an information card with your up-to-date contact information to the back of his shirt or have him wear a medical alert bracelet. Include the words "nonverbal" if applicable. Consider buying commercial electronic locators.
4. Inform the airlines and hotels of your special needs. See if priority seating, bulkhead seats and hotel rooms at the end of the hall are available.
5. Unfortunately, other travelers and the airline may not be prepared for or even sympathetic to someone with ASD. Handing out a wallet card briefly explaining ASD helps with fellow travelers *(tip courtesy of Rebecca Kaplan,* USA Today*)*.
6. Vacation travel should be partially geared to the interests of the child. Don't over-schedule the day as many children require some down time. Some places are known to accommodate special needs children, such as Disney World *(tip courtesy of Amy Lennard Goehner,* TIME*)*.

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