



# *Airports, Airplanes, &* **AUTISM**

*A guide for parents, airport and airline  
personnel to meet the needs of individuals  
with Autism Spectrum Disorders*

# *Understanding Autism*

Autism is a lifelong neurological disability that affects a person's ability to communicate, understand language, play, and socially interact with others. The first signs of autism usually appear as developmental delays before age three.

Every person with autism is different. However, there are some common characteristics of individuals with autism that may occur.

- Difficulty in using and understanding **language**
- Difficulty in using **social skills** and navigating social situations
- **Over or under sensitivity** to sound, sight, taste, touch, or smell
- **Repetitive behaviors** such as spinning or lining up objects
- **Difficulty with changes** to surroundings or routines
- **Challenging behaviors** such as aggression or self-injury



# *What Airport and Airline Providers Need to Know About Passengers with Autism*

Families frequently choose air travel for vacations, family reunions, and special long distance occasions. Flying is new and novel for most children and adolescents. However, **when the passenger is a child with autism, thoughtful preparation and collaboration with parents is important.**

Airports are busy places and there are many things families must do in order to make the flight: check-in and get boarding passes, drop off checked luggage, go through security, find the departure gate, and board the plane. Helping children with autism know what to expect from the trip will help to acclimate them to airport and airline procedures. The following suggestions are prepared for airport and airline personnel and the families of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders.



# *Prepare Ahead*

When flying with a child with autism, it's important that the child know what to expect from the trip, especially if the child is resistant to change or is flying for the first time. Here are a few ideas caregivers can consider when preparing for the trip:

- Call the marketing and community relations department of the airline company to **request photographs of airplanes, seating charts, and pictures of pilots and flight crew.** Request these items early so your child can become familiar with the airplane, seating arrangements, and uniforms the flight crew wear on the airplane.
- **Use airline photographs to make a personal picture book about airplanes and flying.** Include pictures of the airport, the plane, the flight crew, and your child. Reserve the last page of the book to add a photo of the family members or sights the child will see when they arrive at their destination. Take the picture book with you on the day of departure to occupy travel time.
- **Break all flight preparations into small routines and practice each routine before the anticipated trip.** The routines may include packing and putting luggage in the car, driving to the airport, parking the car, riding in the shuttle bus, riding in an elevator, walking into the airport to check in luggage, and locating the restroom. Take a digital camera along and take photographs to include in the child's picture book about flying.
- Before the flight date, **plan one or more short visits with the child to see airplanes on the runway, departing, and arriving.** This may help the child be more familiar with the sights and sounds of "going to the airport".
- **Assemble an "off we go" bag** of favorite calming toys, DVD player, books, drawing pad, and snacks for the trip.
- For young children, **create a game of "runway, take-off and landing" to practice before the flight.** Draw a runway on a sheet of heavy paper, decorate with departure and arrival pictures

and laminate for the trip. Purchase two miniature planes for the activity. Take the planes along with other highly preferred items in a carry-on bag and use the game during flight time. For related art projects visit [www.crayola.com](http://www.crayola.com) and search on “airplane” for a variety of activities to make before the trip.

- Most children with autism respond positively to visual schedules. **Divide the flight into manageable blocks of time and prepare a left-to-right activity picture schedule for the flight.** You may introduce a new activity every 20 minutes or less, alternating with a mini-snack time. By spacing out your treats you and your child have something to look forward to during the flight.

## *Decrease Wait Time, Whenever Possible*

- **Recognize** that simply entering a noisy, crowded airport or airplane may trigger acute anxiety and challenging behaviors in children with autism.
- **Identify that your child has special needs** so that you can expedite the x-ray screening procedure and walking through the metal detector. Tell your child that everyone will be asked to take off their shoes. Remind children that their shoes and favorite toys will be waiting for them when they walk through the metal detector.
- Many families **use the early boarding time** to enter the airplane and get settled with a snack or activity prior to the line of hurried passengers boarding the plane with carry-on luggage.





## *Flight Crew: Let the Caregiver Be Your Guide*

- Always ask about the child's primary form of communication
- Ask about sensory sensitivities to light, sound, touch, and smell
- Inquire about previous flights and what worked to minimize anxiety and calm the individual

## *Modify the Physical Environment*

- Suggest closing passenger window shade to minimize distraction
- Be aware that there may be a fight-or-flight response to any new stressful situation; select a seat away from the aisle to help motivate the child to stay seated
- Consider using headphones if the child is sensitive to sound
- Once the pilot informs passengers it is safe to move around the cabin, allow the child to take a short walk, accompanied by a caregiver, to help regulate the child's level of arousal




## *Model a Caring Attitude for the Flight Crew*

- Move slowly to the child's level to communicate
- Give praise and encouragement
- Use calming body language and give the child extra personal space, whenever possible
- Use a quiet, calm voice and minimize words and touch
- Speak slowly in simple, phrases and pause between requests
- Allow extra time for response
- Expect minimal eye contact

## *Reinforce Cooperative Behavior*

- Provide specific praise and encouragement for all cooperative behavior
- Ignore behaviors that appear different (unusual body movements, unexpected vocalizations, inappropriate words or comments)
- Use pictures to redirect attention showing what will happen and what is expected

## *Be Prepared, Be Proactive*

- Remember prevention is always the best intervention
  - When senses are overloaded and anxiety escalates, some individuals with autism may respond with aggressive behaviors toward others or themselves
  - Enlist caregivers to help redirect, reassure, and restore calm to any escalating situation
  - Notify the flight crew to be prepared, and to gently and quietly approach with assistance as needed
  - Remember, planning ahead is always a good way to have a positive outcome
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Center for Autism & Related Disabilities

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

The Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) provides support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism spectrum disorder and related disabilities.

<https://usf.to/autism>



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