

Information Sheet:

Holidays: Preparation for families

Based on content provided by the UK National Autistic Society (NAS).

Planning a holiday is exciting and sometimes stressful. If a member of your family is autistic, a trip away may involve some extra preparation. This guide will help you prepare.

Beyond simply preparing your family member for being in a different place, it is also useful to think about their individual needs. For example, do they tend to wear the same thing every day and will it be appropriate in the place you're going? If you're going skiing but your family member will only tolerate wearing shorts, you will need to prepare them for wearing more clothes.

Deciding where to go

When choosing a holiday destination, consider the specific needs of your family. Autistic people may have sensory needs, anxiety, or special interests which may make one holiday destination preferable to another.

For example, autistic people may be hypersensitive to noise. It might be helpful to choose a hotel in a quiet location or ask for a hotel room which isn't near noisy public areas, such as the pool area or bar.

Preparation

Once you have decided on your destination, you should tell your family member about the trip. Some autistic people find change difficult, so "surprising" them can result in anxiety or behaviours of concern. In fact, preparation offers the best chance for a successful and happy holiday.

One suggestion is to create a booklet about the holiday, including pictures from brochures and other sources. This support will help your family member to understand where they are going and what it will be like when they are there. However, be aware they may take things very literally and be upset if the holiday is not the same as the images they have seen. Be sure to explain the holiday will resemble these images but some details may differ.

Another idea is to create a timetable of what you will be doing on each day. How structured this timetable needs to be depends on how much your family member relies on routine. You could begin by listing the times you will have breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Holidays: Preparation for families

Some autistic people will feel more comfortable with a detailed schedule of what will happen on each day, while others may be happy with less structured activities like 'explore the hotel' on the first day, 'go to beach' for the second day and so on.

Aeroplanes

If your family member has not travelled on a plane before (or if you are going via a new airport or on a bigger/smaller plane), you may like to visit the airport before your holiday. This will help your family member to understand what the airport is like, as well as allowing them to experience the journey to the airport before you go.



You may wish to contact the airline and explain to them you will be travelling with an autistic person and explain their needs. This will help the airline staff to support your family before and during the flight.

Some airports may be able to arrange for you to tour around an aeroplane or a simulator to help those with disabilities or who might be nervous about flying. This may be of benefit as it provides a sense of what being in an aircraft might be like.

Check-in

Discuss your check-in arrangements with the airline. You may be able to check-in early and avoid waiting in a queue or sit in a quiet area while you wait for your flight to be called. There may be an option to board first or last, depending on what would be most beneficial.

You could also make enquiries about sitting in either the front or back row of the plane, where there is often more room. However, this is often where aircraft toilets are located and there may be a high level of activity, smells, or noise from other passengers.

Flying time

To help your family member cope with noise in the aeroplane, particularly during take-off and landing, you may consider using headphones. Perhaps your family member might like to listen to a familiar piece of reassuring music while in the airport or during the flight? There are also noise-cancelling headphones which are designed to shut out surrounding noise, including the low frequency sounds of aircraft engines. As electronic devices may not be allowed during take-off landing, you should discuss this option and alternatives with the airline before your flight.

There may also be other items which would keep your family member occupied and happy while travelling. These might be favourite objects they like to have with them.

Holidays: Preparation for families

If your family member likes to watch movies or play games on their iPad, making sure it is charged before you travel is essential. For a longer flight, you might like to bring additional power packs to keep the iPad going.

Remember to also bring any items which are 'comforters' at home to help your family member relax while away. You may like to bring a pillow, bed linen, or a sleeping bag as the familiarity of items from home can help some people to feel more relaxed on the plane and when you arrive in a new environment.

Delays

Even the best-planned holiday may be affected by unexpected delays. An autistic person may find it difficult to deal with these unplanned aspects of the trip. Engaging them with a favourite activity during the wait may help. As a part of your preparation, you could write a social script to explain that delays may

Practical Considerations

Medication

If your family member takes regular medication, you will need to discuss this with their doctor before the holiday. It is

wise to take all medications for the length of

the stay, as well as some extras in a separate bag in case of loss/delay of luggage. Some countries will require a letter from your doctor about the medication you're carrying (that country's embassy will be able to provide more specific information on their requirements). It is also important to carry the medication in its original packaging.

Special Access

Some tourist locations have programs for people with special needs. If your holiday will include trips to theme parks or museums, you may want to enquire whether they have an "autism-friendly" or "sensory-friendly" program.

Insurance

We are not aware of any travel insurance companies who cater for autistic people, although some companies may void a policy if a person's pre-existing condition had an impact on the claim. We can only suggest you check the policy of your insurer.

Life on Holidays

Our lifestyle when we are on holidays tends to be a bit different than when we are at home. We may sleep later or eat on a different schedule. Before the holiday, you may like to talk with your family about some simple 'holiday rules'.

Holidays: Preparation for families

This is an opportunity to discuss what will be different and what will be the same on holidays. Your family member will have a chance to understand what will happen and what your expectations are of them for the duration of the holiday.

Try to keep the focus of this conversation positive. Write down the rules you agree to using clear language. Once you have decided on these rules, everyone should stick with them and be consistent. that delays may occur and some waiting will be necessary.

Be Flexible

No matter how much preparation will guarantee everything will go perfectly. For some autistic individuals, new behaviour patterns emerge when on holiday or in an unfamiliar environment. Be mindful of the challenge being in a new situation can pose to an autistic person. Try to be patient and flexible. Don't get too fixated on having the "ideal" holiday and try to get the most from this experience for every member of the family.

Resources

Melbourne Airport has a Disability Access Facilitation Plan which, while not autism- specific, may be useful to families planning to travel through the airport: www.melbourneairport.com.au

Manchester Airport in the UK has an autism specific resource which may offer some guidance: <http://www.manchesterairport.co.uk/about-us/media-centre/airport-awareness>.

Travelling Through the Airport was developed by Irish Autism Action for the Dublin Airport www.dublinairport.com/gns/at-the-airport/autism-asd.aspx

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