



# Airports and Flying

"Take to the friendly skies." I don't remember whose tagline that was, but "friendly skies" could be up for debate by many families who have children with autism. Our kids might think airports have 'strange' and new rules, and airplanes are restrictive by nature. As with most of our children's experiences, preparation plays a large role in the success of your flight.

## Picture and read this

If you can, show your child pictures or video of the airport, airplane, and your destination. They may be especially important if you are not able to make a practice run. You can find general pictures of airport security by googling "airport security pictures". Social stories are another good preparation tool. You could ask your child's teacher or therapist to help draft one for you.

## I swear, my child is not a terrorist

The anticipation of not knowing a procedure, or what to expect next can spike a child's anxiety. Prepare your child for the security process at the airport. Help her understand that she will have to relinquish her shoes and favorite iPod (or other electronic device) but that she will get them back. And ease fears ahead of time that the pass-through metal detector will not shock or provide any harm. Go over key words that may not be used in airports or on planes — bomb, gun, terrorist, etc. (Unless of course that will only prompt the use of those words.) If you are flying out of BWI and worry that your child might blurt out something that could get him detained, or if you have other concerns, contact BWI's TSA Customer Service Manager. Visit our provider database at [www.pathfindersforautism.org/resources/services](http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/resources/services) and select provider type Miscellaneous Services and Products and then choose Vacation for the manager's contact information. You can also contact TSA Cares:

[www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/disabilityandmedicalneeds/tsa\\_cares.shtm](http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/disabilityandmedicalneeds/tsa_cares.shtm)

## Do a practice run at the airport

You may want to consider scheduling a practice run at the airport so that the day you fly the airport procedures won't be a new experience. I did a practice run for my son with Southwest Airlines at BWI. Diane, the Southwest representative, met us at the ticket counter. We were issued gate passes so that she could take us through security and then we headed down to the terminal. She let us board a plane and then showed my kids the baggage claim area, all while answering their many questions. It was a great experience and now my son won't have that anxiety of the unknown when he enters the airport and walks through the security process.

Along with Southwest, the other airlines at BWI that are willing to offer this practice experience are Air Tran, American and Continental. Visit our provider database at <http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/resources/services> and select provider type Miscellaneous Services and Products and then choose Vacation for the contact information of these airlines' BWI Customer Service Managers.

## Pre-board

Ask your airline if you are eligible for pre-boarding so that you aren't trying to get situated amid the crowded boarding chaos.

## Pick a preferred seat

With so many rules and regulations, there won't be many choices, other than where she sits, that your child can make. Would your child prefer to look out the window, or do heights make her nervous? Would an end seat provide her the amusement of watching the flight attendants, or would she be tempted to get up and run down the aisle? Bulkhead seats may offer a little more room if you can get them. Keep in mind that the very back of the plane is noisy.

## Take along your car seat

Let's face it — children, whether they have autism or not, don't typically enjoy sitting for long periods of time. If you have a concern that your child may try to get up and run off, then take along his car seat. It's already familiar to him and will keep him in his seat. If your child has a difficult time sitting still, talk to the flight attendants ahead of time to let them know that your child may do better if allowed to walk the aisle whenever the fasten seatbelt sign is off.

## Stay busy

What will your child have to keep him busy during the travel time or maybe the wait time at an airport? Don't forget to bring those favorite toys and activities, snacks or items that bring comfort to your child. Make sure you include some non-electronic items for those "turn off your electronics" times during the flight. Before you pack that bag, you may want to double check with your airline's carry-on baggage rules.

## Take care of those ears

Lots of people = lots of noise. Not to mention most of us are able to tune-out the noisy hum of the plane's ventilation system. These sounds may be amplified for our kids, so you may want to bring a set of ear plugs or headphones. Bring gum or hard candy to help relieve popping in your child's ears, or check with your doctor or pharmacist about ear drops.

*Special thanks to Bianca Bennett and Diane McNally at Southwest for their time, assistance, and openness.*

Shelly Allred, Pathfinders for Autism  
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**Parent Tips: Vacation Tips** [www.pathfindersforautism.org/articles/view/parent-tips-vacation-tips](http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/articles/view/parent-tips-vacation-tips)

**Air Travel Preparation** from The Center for Children with Special Needs <http://cshcn.org/planning-record-keeping/air-travel-preparation>

**The Autism Passport** [www.asdvacations.com/2013/05/09/the-autism-passport/](http://www.asdvacations.com/2013/05/09/the-autism-passport/)

**Flying to See Janet** by Laura Vickers

**"A little planning goes a long way: individuals with autism and their families get ready for holiday travel!"** by Autism Speaks <http://blog.autismspeaks.org/2010/12/02/a-little-planning-goes-a-long-way-individuals-with-autism-and-their-families-get-ready-for-holiday-travel/>

**Air Travel Guide for Children with Autism** <http://airtravel.about.com/b/2009/04/04/air-travel-guide-for-children-with-autism.htm>