

PFA Tips

Vacation Tips

Face it, we all need a break. Vacations can either give us that well deserved down time, or they can be stressful and disastrous. So here are some things to keep in mind when planning that trip:

Sensory issues don't take a vacation

The smells that bother your child, the noises that scare him, the textures that annoy him; those heightened senses are all coming with him on your vacation. This sounds so obvious. But when you are looking at those tempting vacation brochures, it's easy to forget. Make a list of the sensory issues that impact your child the most and cross-reference them with the vacation's description. You simply may have to forgo the beach if your child can't tolerate the feeling of sand.

Like real estate, consider location, location, location

Can your child handle crowds and noise? What about the aromas of a city known for its cuisine? Can your child walk for long distances? Are there places for your child to take breaks in quiet areas throughout the day? Consider the environment of your vacation spot in the same manner you evaluate your home and school settings.

When to travel

You may want to consider non-peak times of the year to hit your destination to take advantage of lower rates and smaller crowds. However, timing and weather may play a greater role for some kids. If your child is afraid of thunderstorms, a late summer/early fall trip to the Outer Banks or Florida could be terrifying for the child. If your child becomes agitated by heat and sweat, travel north or wait for a cooler month.

Prepare your child for the trip

We already know that most of our kids have difficulty adjusting to changes in routines. Eliminate surprises by showing your child photos or videos of your vacation spot or some of the activities you plan to do. Social stories may also be helpful.

Vacationing with others

If you are traveling with family or friends, how well do they know your child? You may want to have some conversations letting them know how your child may act or react and offer suggestions for ways to have the best interactions with your child. If your child has a particular passion, you may encourage your family to engage the child with activities related to that area of interest.

This will be your home away from home

Are you staying in a cramped hotel room? Will your child be subjected to the thundering echo of the hair dryer, or are there multiple rooms for your child to retreat? Or do large spaces scare your child because she fears being lost from you? Will you need accommodations where you can prepare special foods? If you choose to stay in a rental home, look for the same safety standards you need in your own home; locks on doors and windows, cabinets with sharp objects, etc. Pools and fences may be of special concern if your child tends to wander or run away.



Take a nanny, sitter, or other caregiver

Give yourself this opportunity to accept help and take some of the load off of you. Find a responsible teenager that would love the chance to visit a vacation spot while getting paid. Take advantage of nature's cruel joke; teenagers tend to be more energetic than us, so he or she can keep up with the kids and allow you a chance to rest. This could also afford you some special alone time with your significant other.

Consider a vacation travel service for special needs

Visit our Provider Database and select the category Vacation for vacation packages and services that cater especially to people with disabilities, including cruises, and other theme parks, concerts and nature trips.

Bring those favorite toys

How many times have you gotten somewhere and panicked when you realized you didn't have Muffin Bear?

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Make sure you have the toys, headphones, music and equipment that comfort your child.

Create a daily planner

We don't exactly have "go with the flow" kind of kids. You may be able to pre-empt some meltdowns simply by making the day predictable. Encourage your child to make some suggestions for activities and include them on a visual schedule. Make sure you include "free time".

Consider your mode of transportation

Does your child get sea sick in the bathtub or carsick on the way to the grocery store? This may impact your dream vacation of taking a cruise or driving across the country. What will your child have to keep him busy during the travel time or maybe the wait time

at an airport? And if you're flying, keep in mind that the very back of the plane is noisy. 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. Also, 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.

Investigate services and amenities

Look online or call for special offers, services, and accommodations that are available for people with disabilities. But don't wait until you arrive at your

destination because some places, like Disney, require a doctor's note to access the special services.

Ignore rudeness

Sadly, you might encounter rude comments or stares no matter where you go. You can view these times as opportunities to provide a little autism awareness and education. Or just smile at the knowledge that if you have traveled out of town you will never run into these people again.

Most importantly, never forget that your family vacation is supposed to be FUN. A little extra planning may take time, but could make your adventure more enjoyable.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Airports and Flying

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/recreation/pfa-tips-airports-and-flying>

The Autism Passport

<http://www.asdvacations.com/2013/05/09/the-autism-passport/>

Disney Parks Disability Access Service Card Fact Sheet

<https://disney.parks.disney.go.com/blog/disney-parks-disability-access-service-card-fact-sheet/>

How the Disney disability card works: 9 tips for parents of kids with special needs

<http://www.lovethatmax.com/2014/01/how-disney-disability-card-works.html>

Cruising with a child with a disability by Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality

<http://sath.org/cruising-with-a-child-with-a-disability>

PFA Online Provider Database

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

Select Category > Vacation

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