

Vacationing with Autism: Planning for Success

By Mary Kae Marinac

Vacation season can be a blessing, or a curse, for families of children diagnosed with autism. I prefer to see it as an immense opportunity – to broaden everyone’s horizons, including the people you meet at your destination, your special child, and your own.

However, children on the spectrum surprise us at every turn, no matter their functioning level. New places and sensory experiences can provoke either nuclear meltdown – or delight, or manic levels of excitement enough to pose a safety concern. What worked last year may be a horror show the next. On the other hand, experiences we feared may be a child’s favorite part of the trip.

You never know – and that’s both the challenge, and the fun.

The world is the same oyster for the autistic kid’s family as it is for anyone: it holds pearls, if we take the time, care, and persistence to pry it open just a little. Here are 10 tips to enhance your vacation experience this summer – or get you started.

1. Treat vacationing as a skill. Teach your child the framework of what it’s like to go away. Start small. Go out for a day, or just one night at a motel. Practice what the word “vacation” means. For us, the core of any vacation is a car trip, meals at restaurants, and a motel with a pool. These are things my autistic children love. When I say “vacation,” now they know they will get things they love, even if we have to say “First museum, then pool.”

2. Plan, Plan, Plan. Bore into Web site details about motel layouts and activities in advance. Work through the transition issues such as whether there will be frequent enough bathroom stops, airport waiting time or security checkpoints. Walk through the day you’re contemplating from your child’s point of view, so you can think in advance about behavioral challenges or items you might bring.

I always call motels in advance to verify pool hours and make sure it’s not under construction during our visit. Sometimes I’ve asked about nearby playgrounds, tennis courts, or whether we can walk into town. Car trips are implicitly easier than plane trips. I usually choose cheaper, less fancy motels over hotels where I’d worry over damaged furniture or toilet accidents. For every stop along the way, I define an exit plan in case the kids can’t tolerate the setting – whether it’s the car, a walk around the block, or the motel room. Even now, with my autistic sons at age 14 and accomplished vacationers, I still believe the optimum vacation length for us is 5 days. If we need to be away longer, I change environments after a few days, but not so much that we move every day.

3. Work to your strengths. My kids tolerate change as long as they know the schedule. So I bring Meyer-Johnson picture cards to emphasize today’s routine and any deviations. They love to walk and eat, and basically sleep at night once they settle down, although this took a few years for one of them. I try to adhere to a typical vacation framework of motel, regular meals, pool time and motel. When they’re bored, we go for a walk. If they need motivation, there’s always lunch. For parents whose children don’t sleep or for whom motels are agitating, revert to step 1. Start small. Practice. Give yourself space to sleep in.

4. Consider the sensory environment. Crowded, noisy environments like fairs and amusement parks – or even public restrooms—can bring out the worst in our kids. Strong smells also can be aversive, such as at farms. Sensory issues also change - if your child loved roller coasters last summer, he may not do so next week.

5. Balance structure with downtime. Plan your days in time blocks, but also allow “stim” time for your child – and your own favorite way to decompress. For us, this means we usually bring a portable DVD player so we know our kids can watch their favorite videos, while we get time to put up our feet. Make

sure your other typical children also get to do what they want sometimes. It's supposed to be a vacation for everyone, including the parents.

6. Address bolting and other safety issues. Bolting is our biggest safety fear – from hotel rooms or from us in crowd. Unfortunately in both cases, there are few substitutes for vigilance. Parents should do the obvious, of course, in using safety latches in hotel rooms and holding hands/staying close to kids in crowds. As our autistic sons grew older and capable of opening the safety latches, we now sometimes move heavy furniture in front of hotel doors to impede their departure. Parents also should think about the reasons behind the bolts – i.e. the preferred item the child is seeking – to anticipate possible moves. When I enter a hotel, I often make a mental note of the location of the pool, vending machine/ice machine, computers and elevators, since these are usually our reasons for bolts. If the child does leave, you'll know where to look first.

7. Bring kids' backpacks and an emergency Church Backpack. I pack a separate backpack for each child (even typically developing ones) with their favorite items. In our car we always bring our so-called Church Backpack with puzzles, iPod (indispensable for those kids who like music), a Leap Pad with headphones, magazines, art supplies, books, etc. for quiet play during waiting times. I always bring Starburst candies because they're neat, small and help equalize pressure changes on planes. If we travel by plane, I dump the best of the Church Backpack into an oversized satchel so I've always got snacks, Kleenex, a few PECs cards, puzzles, an Uno game, etc. During long rides, I've also brought a computer so kids can play games or videos.

8. Staff the vacation appropriately. Bring a friend or family member to crowded or novel environments, so you have help in case your child behaves unexpectedly. This is particularly important for single parents. If you travel with family, if possible, only invite those truly helpful family members to participate with you in stressful or chaotic environments. This sounds harsh, but as a veteran of times where family all said they'd help then left me alone to mind my autistic kids for hours alone in an unfriendly setting while the family enjoyed themselves – you're better safe than frustrated

9. Tell people. With rare exception, most strangers go out of their way to be helpful. Tell security guards and admissions staff that your child is autistic and may behave unexpectedly. Ask for disability discounts on your admission up front, so if you have to make a swift departure, you won't be out a king's ransom.

10. Set expectations appropriately, and expect little miracles. To be clear, vacations with your autistic child won't be a carefree day at the spa. You'll always have your antennae up for your child's well-being. There may even be days that are lousy.

Yet there will also be moments, even days, you'll treasure. I never would have guessed my son Jeff would love the hot, sulphur-smelling geysers at Yellowstone, or that Will would think a propeller plane's blades were like his own personal fan outside his window, had we not taken a chance on a vacation I thought was well beyond their capabilities.

In a vacation planning group for families of autistic kids that I once facilitated, half of the families – one side of the room - had never taken their autistic child on an out-of-town vacation. Parents on the No side felt the child couldn't tolerate change, or required too many supports. The other side of the room had taken amazing journeys. The difference seemed more about the parents than the functioning level of the kids.

Here's hoping I see on you the Yes side of the room soon.

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We Like....

Harder to do....

cheap motels
small swimming pools
4-5 day trips
Disney
Clark's Trading Post
hiking
adult/autistic child ratio
car trips
fast food restaurants
quiet spaces and places
movies to our kids' interests
beaches on calm days
booths at restaurants

(*advanced skill for many)

historic hotels
water parks w/water slides
Saturday-to-Saturday stays
Six Gun City
Santa's Village
canoeing
"helpful" family members
airplanes*
formal dining
crowds
IMAX*
windy settings
tables at restaurants