



Airports,  
Airplanes, &  
**AUTISM**

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

# Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) 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 ASD usually appear as developmental delays before age three.

Every person with ASD 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



## Helping Children with ASD Navigate Airport Travel

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 ASD, thoughtful preparation and collaboration between airline staff and 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 ASD 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.



# Information for Parents

## Prepare Ahead

When flying with a child with ASD, 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, electronic devices, 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 ASD 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.

## *TSA Cares Help Line*

TSA Cares is a help line to assist travelers with disabilities and medical conditions. When a passenger with a disability or medical condition calls TSA Cares, a representative will provide assistance, either with information about screening that is relevant to the passenger's specific disability or medical condition, or the passenger may be referred to disability experts at TSA.

TSA's Passenger Support Specialists identify and resolve traveler-related screening concerns quickly to enhance the traveler experience. More than 2,600 Passenger Support Specialists at airports across the country assist passengers who require additional assistance with security checkpoint screening. Passenger Support Specialists receive specialized disability training. TSA recommends that passengers call approximately 72 hours ahead of travel so that TSA Cares has the opportunity to coordinate checkpoint support with a TSA Customer Service Manager located at the airport when necessary. The TSA agent will help the airport prepare for your departure, and will also contact the receiving airport to coordinate your return flight needs.



**Transportation  
Security  
Administration**

**TSA Cares Help Line  
1-855-787-2227**

call well in advance of your travel. Some families have found a test run

Travelers may call TSA Cares toll free at 1-855-787-2227. A Passenger Support Specialist must be requested at least one day ahead of travel, but if you have concerns about your child's ability to tolerate the airport experience, you may

through the security checkpoint will enhance predictability for the person with ASD, and TSA Cares has been able to support these practice runs.

TSA Cares help lines are open Monday through Friday 8 a.m. – 11 p.m. Eastern Time, and weekends and Holidays 9 a.m. – 8 p.m. Eastern Time. Travelers who are deaf or hard of hearing can use a relay service to contact TSA Cares or can e-mail TSA Cares at [TSA-ContactCenter@tsa.dhs.gov](mailto:TSA-ContactCenter@tsa.dhs.gov).

### **Waiting to Enter the Screening Area:**

- Many airports have lanes specifically for use by passengers with disabilities and medical conditions or those traveling with young children. While passengers still may need to wait in line if they use these lanes, the lines often are much shorter and the wait time generally is less. A passenger can ask to be directed to one of these lanes when checking in with his or her airline or once he or she has reached the general line used by passengers. Use of these lanes is not limited to passengers who have physical disabilities. Passengers with cognitive and psychological disabilities that make it difficult to wait in line are also allowed to use these lanes. If the airport or checkpoint does not have a lane set aside for passengers with disabilities or families, or a passenger does not want to use that lane, any eligible passenger who has difficulty standing can request to move to the front of any line and be accompanied by his or her traveling companions. This request can be made for any disability or medical condition that makes waiting and standing difficult, including cognitive and psychological conditions. However, not every security line area is managed by TSA personnel and the airport authority, or the airlines, may be overseeing the line.
- A passenger should inform the personnel overseeing the line that he or she may have difficulty standing or waiting in line due to a disability or medical condition before entering the line. Passengers can use TSA's Notification Card to communicate discreetly with security officers. However, showing this card or other medical documentation will not exempt a passenger from additional screening.



### **At the Screening Checkpoint:**

- The passenger or his or her traveling companions should inform the officer conducting the screening of the passenger's needs before screening begins. The passenger or his or her traveling companions may offer suggestions on the best way to approach and screen the passenger, especially if it is necessary to touch him or her during screening. Passengers can be screened using imaging technology or walk-through metal detectors only if they can walk through on their own. If a passenger cannot or chooses not to be screened by imaging technology or a walk-through metal detector, the passenger will be screened using a thorough patdown procedure.

- Children with disabilities can be screened without being separated from their parents or guardians. Parents or guardians should inform the officer conducting the screening of the child's needs before screening begins. Parents or guardians may offer suggestions on the best way to approach and screen their children.
- If you run into trouble at the check point, travelers requiring special accommodations or who have concerns about checkpoint screening may ask a checkpoint officer or supervisor for a Passenger Support Specialist who will provide on-the-spot assistance. Travelers may also request a Passenger Support specialist ahead of time by calling the TSA Cares hotline at 1-855-787-2227.

### *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





# *Information for Airport and Airline Personnel*

## *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

## *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

## *CARD Can Help!*

The Florida Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities are available for technical assistance at no cost to help you create Autism-Friendly airports and airlines. To request support, please call 1-800-9-AUTISM and select the center closest to your airport or local headquarters.





CENTER FOR AUTISM & RELATED DISABILITIES

*Florida's First Choice for Autism Support*

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

**1 - 800 - 9 - AUTISM**



Florida Department of Education  
Pam Stewart, Commissioner

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