

Tips for Traveling with Children on the Spectrum at Walt Disney World

A trip to Walt Disney World can be a positive, rewarding experience for children with autism and similar special needs. And while any Disney vacation requires a certain amount of planning, a little extra effort to accommodate your special child will pay large dividends when you get to the parks.

A Note from Your Doctor

One of the first things to do is obtain a letter from your child's primary physician that explains your child's specific condition and any special needs the condition implies. For example, some children with autism are unable to wait in lines for more than a few minutes, or in queues surrounded by a large number of people. Your doctor's letter should be explicit enough to fully convey your child's condition to the Disney Castmember reading the letter. We've found that the following template (on your doctor's letterhead) works well:

To Whom It May Concern:

<Child's name> is a delightful child who has been diagnosed with <child's condition>. This diagnosis impedes his ability to wait for extended periods of time and he struggles with sensory issues (e.g., touch) that may impact his ability to wait in lines. Please offer what accommodations you can for this young man and his family.

Sincerely,

<Doctor's name>

Disney's Guest Assistance Card

Bring your doctor's note to the Guest Relations window at any Disney theme park and ask for the Guest Assistance Card. The Guest Assistance Card is a special pass designed to allow you to wait in a separate, un-crowded holding area apart from the regular queues at most attractions. One Card is good for all four parks, so you do not need to obtain separate Cards at each park. You should also pick up a copy of each park's Guidebook for Guests with Disabilities (also available online at <http://www.DisneyWorld.com>. Type "guests disabilities FAQ" in the search tool and browse through the results.).

We have heard from several families with doctor's notes who were told by Disney Castmembers that no "special assistance" card existed. To test awareness of the Card, we sent research teams to ask for the Card at Guest Relations in each of the parks. In three out of four cases, the Disney Castmember knew exactly what we were looking for and explained clearly how the Card worked. At one park, however, we encountered a Castmember who knew nothing about the Card or how to get one. Aware of the high standards Disney normally has in this area, we figured it was time to give someone a call.

To their credit, Disney's Park Operations group was genuinely shocked to hear our findings. Their explanation, which we can understand, is that Guest Relations is occasionally staffed by recently hired Castmembers who may not yet be familiar with every benefit Disney offers. If you

should encounter a Castmember-in-training, Disney advises the following: Firmly but politely ask for the Castmember's manager, and explain the situation to the manager. Managers at Guest Relations are seasoned Disney veterans who are virtually certain to know about the Guest Assistance Card. In the unlikely event that the manager does not know of the Card, ask to speak to an "Area Manager." An Area Manager is responsible for the day-to-day operation of a significant section of the park, and we're assured that they will know about the Card.

The Card does not allow you to bypass the normal waits at each attraction. It is designed to provide "more convenient entrance" into most attractions. In some cases, this entrance may be through the attraction's FASTPASS return line or the attraction's exit. The Guidebook for Guests with Disabilities will list the special entrance to use for each attraction, as well as any special effects (e.g., loud noises or flashing lights) in the attraction.

More Tips

Several families have sent us their hotel, restaurant and transportation tips, too. For example, a quiet hotel room can often help children unwind after a day in one of the parks. A list of the best room numbers in each Disney resort can be found in the Unofficial Guide to WDW. Other tips sent in by readers include the following:

- Be sure to schedule breaks throughout the day. A mid-day nap or quick dip in the pool may be just the thing to relax any weary, over-stimulated members of your group.
- A set of earplugs brought from home may help children with attractions that have loud music or sound effects.
- If you will be using a shuttle or bus service from the Orlando airport to your hotel, consider the use of a towncar service instead. Shuttle and bus services usually drop guests off at multiple hotels, and it is not uncommon for the trip to take two hours. In contrast, most towncar services will drive you directly from the airport to your hotel.
- Whenever possible, obtain Priority Seating for meals and consider asking for a table near an exit or window.
- If traveling between Disney resorts, consider using a taxi instead of Disney transportation to save time.
- Sensory-defensive children may enjoy the 'deep pressure' sensation of the sandy beaches or whirlpools found at some Disney resorts. The wave pool at Typhoon Lagoon also gets high marks from readers.
- Pin trading with Disney Castmembers offers a safe, scripted opportunity for children to work on their social and communication skills.

We are grateful to the many families with autistic children who have shared their Disney experiences with us.