

Summer Fun: Have Autism...will travel!

By Nicole Beurkens, M.Ed., Neurodevelopmental Disorders Specialist

Ah.....Summer time. Time to relax, kick back, take it easy, put the daily grind behind and do a little leisurely travel. Well, it's not quite so easy when part of the family unit has special considerations, such as an autism spectrum or other sensory processing disorder. When a simple summer trip or outing can become the catalyst for a major melt down and create far more stress than it seems worth, or when it becomes the antithesis to a vacation, it may seem time to throw in the towel and just stay home and vegetate.

Do not do it! You need the summer fun experience and your family needs it as well. Planning in the front end of a summer excursion can make the entire effort more relaxed and worth while. Fortunately we have some educated insights from Nicole Beurkens of Horizons Developmental Remediation Center. Nicole is an Autism specialist who provides practical information and advice for families living with autism and other developmental disabilities, and has kindly consented to give us some excellent tips on how to prevent sensory over load issues before they occur. As I'm certain you're aware, it is much easier to maintain an 'initial trajectory of calm' than it is to do 'field triage' after an emotional crisis has begun.

The following six tweaks can give a boost to the trip planning process as well as a boost to your confidence regarding its outcome. And hey, positive attitude is the name of the game. Enjoy the following tips and please let us know how they have impacted your trip experience so that we can pass the information along to others!

Summer Travel Tips –

1. Plan ahead

Make sure you know where you are going, what you would like to do, and where you will stay before you leave for your trip. This way you know what the accommodations will be like and what is available so you can prepare yourself and your child ahead of time. If you need physical accommodations for your child, such as wheelchair accessibility, be sure to discuss your needs with hotels, rental car companies, and other services ahead of time so there are no surprises. Planning ahead also allows you to discuss the trip and prepare your child ahead of time. This helps reduce children's anxiety because they know what to expect and can anticipate what is coming.

2. Maintain normal routines

Even though you are away from home it is best to maintain at least basic eating and sleeping routines as much as possible. If your child requires a special diet or likes certain foods, be sure to bring them with you so appropriate meal and snack options are always available. Adhering to a regular schedule of bedtime and waking time, including naps, will also help everything go more

smoothly as your child will be well rested.

3. When planning your activities, try to avoid crowds and long lines

These can be over stimulating for many children. It can be helpful to plan for mealtimes either just before or after the busiest times of day. Many theme parks and other attractions will make special accommodations for families of children with disabilities if you ask for them. This can include getting passes to go to the front of lines and using special entrances to exhibits. Find out what accommodations are available based on your specific circumstances before you travel.

4. Bring plenty of activities to help entertain your child and keep him/her comfortable.

This may include movies, games, and books that your child prefers, along with items such as a special blanket, stuffed animal, or pillow for sleeping. Despite the best plans, long waits and changes can occur. Having a bag of activities to keep your child occupied can make these unforeseen times more tolerable for your child, your family, and those around you.

5. If you are traveling quite a distance and your child has a tendency to become motion sick or behaviorally agitated while traveling, it may be beneficial to discuss medication options with your child's doctor.

These can range from over-the-counter medications, to prescription medications, to homeopathic options for helping your child feel his or her best and stay emotionally regulated while traveling. This is especially important if you will be traveling for many hours on an airplane or other contained space where there are limited options for doing anything but sitting.

6. Set reasonable expectations for the trip, for your child, and for yourself.

Make sure you are not setting your family up for a disappointing and frustrating experience by planning activities that are unlikely to go well. For example, if your child is easily over stimulated and has difficulty staying still for any length of time, then a theme park in the middle of summer is probably not the best option. It is important to find balance between the things people in the family want to do and the things your child with a disability is able to do, in order to ensure a positive experience for everyone involved.