

# Managing Vacations and Staycations

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Overwhelmed is probably an accurate word to describe your feelings associated with your child being out of school. But, with preparation and planning, this experience can become something that feels more encouraging. Keep in mind that you most likely put preparation and thought into even short errands or brief visits with relatives, so understandably a week-long vacation will take much more effort. That effort will be well worth your while and will increase the likelihood of a positive experience for yourself, your child and other family members. These tips apply to both vacation weeks at home as well as your going away someplace.



## ***Definitely use Visuals***

This tip cannot be emphasized enough. Use larger, calendar visuals to outline how the time will be scheduled and where your child will be. For example, use a count-down calendar leading up to the first day of the vacation, and then use a calendar to outline what your child will be doing each day. If you are staying at home, a visual could identify the special activity of the day (e.g., beach trip) or if you are away, the visual could identify what is going to happen that day and where your child will sleep that night (e.g., beach then Grammy's house for bed). Additional mini-schedules can be used to outline each activity in greater detail (e.g., beach = swim, build sand castle, eat lunch, take walk, swim, snack, go home).

If your child likes the computer, you can research pictures and photos of your destinations (even for a vacation consisting of brief day trips away from your home). You can print these with your child and create a packet of pictures. Or, you can locate and print pictures from the internet yourself to review with your child. Review of these pictures will provide a sense of familiarity for your child about places that might otherwise be unknown and perhaps even scary.

## ***Wait-Time Items***

Be sure to have a supply of items that can occupy your child especially during 'wait times' (e.g., waiting in line to enter a museum). These items (such as small fidget toys) should only be offered to your child at these pre-determined times so that their appeal remains high. If you are staying at home, it might also be pleasing to your child if you circulated some toys/leisure items back into their home routine that they previously enjoyed but have not had access to for a while. The novelty of the items might result in additional play and leisure activities to structure your child's time. In general, filling unstructured time with leisure and recreational times can be challenging. Brainstorm with your school staff for specific suggestions about how to create structure during these otherwise longer periods of unstructured time.

## ***Collaborate***

In general, collaborate with those people who know and understand your child's preferences, skills and challenges. Ask your child's teachers for ideas about visuals or other strategies that you could implement on vacation. For example, does the teacher have a 'rules list' (e.g., quiet voice, calm hands, follow directions) that is used at school that you could also use; having a familiar visual reference will increase the likelihood of your success and provide consistency for your child as well.

## ***Don't Over-Schedule***

Do not over-schedule yourselves. Perhaps identify one new activity for each day, preferably earlier in the day so that your child will be more focused and have more energy for the novel experience. In addition, build in quiet time each day regardless of where you are staying and what your itinerary is. This quiet time should be similar to any quiet time that you have at home. For example, if quiet time on a weekday afternoon consists of books and classical music in your child's bedroom, then quiet time over vacation (at home, at a hotel or at a relative's house) should be as similar as possible.

Although adults (and perhaps other family members such as siblings) are often most interested in novel experiences and a change of pace over a vacation week, your child with autism will most likely find great comfort with more familiar experiences. Not to sound boring? - but keep in mind that your child might be happiest with only familiar foods (e.g., if your child only eats chicken nuggets at home, anticipate that your child will only eat chicken nuggets on a vacation away from home), familiar items (e.g., bring your child's pillow with you) and familiar routines (e.g., if your child likes to watch Elmo before bed when at home, your child will still want to watch Elmo before bed when staying in a hotel or at Grammy's house).

Although you may be dreaming of a change of scenery coupled with wonderful, new experiences, your child's 'dream vacation' most likely consists of those preferred foods, items and routines that are familiar and well-known. With careful planning, however, your scheduled vacation can be enjoyed by all family members.