

Traveling with children with special needs



By Sara Masri

Advice for the experienced and the unprepared



PROVIDENCE – “Whenever we travel, we anticipate the worst; if it turns out better, then it gives us hope for the next time.” Although a mother whose child attends Meeting Street, a school for children with all disabilities, said that, virtually any parent who has traveled with his or her young children might concur. Nevertheless, it is especially the case when traveling with a child with special needs.

Carolyn Dalglish, the owner of Systems for Sensory Kids (www.systemsforsensorykids.com), said, “The best way to support a child with special needs for summer travel is preparation ahead of time, having a clear daily schedule for your child while on the trip and making sure you plan for downtime and take frequent calming breaks.”

Of course, unplanned things can always happen (such as a 10-hour plane odyssey I endured in December), but the more you can prepare in advance the more likely you are to have a smooth trip. Whether a child’s special needs are physical, behavioral or developmental, she recommends some strategies that should make travel a smoother experience.

- **Preparation is key**

Take photos you find online (or photos you already have) and create a “trip book” for your child. Include pictures of where you are going, people you might be seeing and the house/hotel you are staying in. Review the trip book for a couple of weeks before leaving to familiarize your child with all aspects of the trip. It can also help open up discussions about any new or unnerving experiences that could take place.

- **Pack that schedule, bring comfort items**

Make a blank daily schedule that can be filled in everyday with a dry erase marker. Fill it in together and use words or pictures that the child recognizes. In addition, let the child pack a few comfort items from home such as favorite toys or items that provide sensory comfort.

- **Preparing your hosts for your visit**

If you are staying in a house with family or friends, let the hosts know that “John needs a quiet area sometimes,” or “Jane is sensitive to these following foods.” If the travel involves staying in a hotel, let the staff know about any special needs in advance.

Phyllis Karas, on the www.grandparents.com, suggests things such as speaking with on-site chefs about allergies, making sure all public spaces are handicap accessible and seeing if a theme park has a way to avoid long lines (most do). Little things like these go a long way to making your hosts or the hotel staff – and your entire family – more comfortable.

- **Don’t over-schedule**

Re-adjust your expectations of what is doable on vacation. Travel can be exhausting for any child, but just being in a new area with new people will exhaust and overwhelm a child with special needs. Build in breaks and some quiet time to allow your child a chance to rest.

In addition, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has published tips for parents and about flying with children with special needs. Among other things, the TSA suggests informing the TSA agent upfront about any potential issues, offers suggestions about minimizing your child’s confusion or stress. You may need to advise TSA that you will need to stay with your child at all times.

One parent of a child with special needs suggested shipping any critical items ahead of time if you are worried that the airline might lose an important item. Her daughter requires special nutritional beverage supplements; knowing that they have already arrived at their destination makes her feel more at ease. In addition, if your child has sensory issues that may be difficult on a flight, one mother carries a doctor’s note explaining her child’s autism and shows it to flight attendants as she boards.

In talking with Dalglish and visiting many Web sites, I learned that certain strategies benefit all individuals traveling with kids, but that they are critical to traveling successfully with a child with special needs. With these tips, perhaps your summer travels will be a little easier.

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