

# Going on holiday

**Many people find travelling a stressful experience. There are many reasons why an autistic person might find travelling a challenge. This factsheet highlights some strategies to help overcome these challenges.**

## Change in routine

Autistic people can find changes in routine to be challenging for many reasons:

- New environments, timings and experiences create unpredictability and uncertainty which may be different from their usual routine.
- There may be a vast range of new sensory experiences, new expectations, new activities, and certain parts of their usual environment which are absent.

## Sensory processing

Each step of the journey to going on holiday can present brand new sensory experiences which could be the first time these have been encountered or different even from previous holidays. For example, packing the suitcase may involve new sounds, smells, and visual arrangements of clothing. The journey to the airport may be in a new taxi in the early hours which is an unknown new experience. The airport itself can be overwhelming for many people with the number of people, tannoy announcements, smells of the food court, bright lights, air conditioning to name a few elements. Upon arriving at your destination, a change of climate alone presents a vastly different tactile experience if visiting a significantly hotter or colder country for example.

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## Strategies

### Visual schedules

With a substantial change in routine, setting clear expectations of what is happening next, and a clear visual reminder can help manage things better. Having visuals of what is happening now, next, and later may help provide reassurance, structure and clarity as well as giving a reference point to go back to, should questions or anxieties arise. Incorporating preferred activities or showing when meals are, for example, can provide some structure and familiarity amidst the uncertainty and change. Try to stick to your child's usual routine in terms of wake up, snack time, lunch time etc.

### Regulation activities

All the changes and sensory stimuli mentioned above can impact on an autistic person's emotional state or physiological state. Having calming activities, strategies and items can help them manage some of this by helping give them the tools to come back to a more neutral, calm, and happy state. For example, for someone who is particularly sensitive to noise, finding a quiet space, having headphones with preferred audio or items which make a preferred noise may help offset some of the unwanted auditory stimuli they are experiencing. If your child often regulates themselves through movement, then finding activities which fulfil this need or spaces to engage in those activities are vital to ensuring they can regulate and get those needs met to help manage the stresses and anxieties.

## Visual stories

Another tool that can be utilised to help with expectations of the sequence of events, what to expect and what they can or cannot do is a visual story. Having visuals of the places you will be going, activities they may be doing, who is going and how long for, can all help. This also gives you something to refer to and to help them understand when they can do things they like or where they can go to engage in preferred or regulation activities. Go through this a number of times in advance with your child. For more information on visual stories (how to write them and an example visual story), see our **What is a visual story?** resource.

Other considerations and ideas:

- Sunflower lanyards – a discreet sign that the wearer has a hidden disability and may require additional support (see [hiddendisabilitiesstore.com](http://hiddendisabilitiesstore.com)).
- Travelling at less busy times (not at rush hour, or first day of the school holidays).
- Knowing where rest stops are, or when there is a break available from travelling.



- If flying, using the airport assistance and accessing priority check-in, security, and boarding. Mention your child's needs at check-in. The DPNA CODE (disabled passenger with intellectual or developmental disability needing assistance) is a Special Service Request (SSR) code. SSR codes are used in the airline industry to communicate traveller preferences or needs to airlines. This should also mean that you don't need to pay to sit next to each other!
- On planes make staff aware of any needs your child may have, such as needing extra time to leave the train or plane, or having your meal served first.
- If you are visiting theme parks or resorts, many offer assistance to children and adults with disabilities, including shorter wait times and priority access.
- Visiting the airport before the journey with the young person.
- Asking the airport if they have a visual story or obtaining photos of the airport, plan to create a visual story.
- Ensure your child has access to highly preferred items throughout the journey. Bring lots of activities to keep them busy. If they are sensitive to noise, bring noise cancelling headphones and/or headphones to listen to music/favourite downloaded video.
- Providing options where possible through the journey (e.g., where to eat).
- Check if the airport has any autism friendly resources, areas or trained staff who can provide support or answer questions.
- Consider the travel arrangements on arrival to get to your hotel/ destination from the airport to avoid delays or uncertainty (e.g., booking a transfer or shuttle tickets).