

Flying with Autism

By Richard Kargel, Pilot, Delta Air Lines

Start prepping early.... as in weeks early

- The more you plan in advance, the less stressful your actual vacation will be.
 - Use a calendar to count the days.
 - Develop a picture story starting with packing bags, car ride to the airport, going through security, boarding at gate, getting on airplane, pictures inside of an airliner, arriving at destination airport, baggage claim, and of course of your destination (the big prize!). All these pictures can be found on the Internet, Google Images, or Boardmaker.
 - Review the days and activities frequently
- You may find it helpful to start a “Vacation Spreadsheet” that helps you plan and structure each day’s activities.
- If your destination is a “fun spot” a.k.a. Disney, use that as your reward by showing pictures of Disney / Pixar and watching their movies, stating that you are going to go visit where they live and might even meet them
- There are also many kid’s travel guidebooks from publishers like Birnbaums. Most are very visual with lots of pictures.
- For an older child, you might also want to get a book about airplanes and how they fly, so they understand what the plane will be doing.

Things to pack

- *Whatever keeps them occupied at home, bring it on vacation if at all possible!* Game Boys, Nintendo, tablets, or laptops loaded with games and movies (bring headphones/ear buds as a courtesy to fellow passengers), paper with colored pencils, and favorite objects such as teddy bears, etc.
- You can bring solid snacks from home that aren’t paste or liquid based. Liquids (and solid food) can be purchased in the terminal and brought on the aircraft. Gluten-free and dairy-free items are now available in most major airports.
- For children with sensitivity to sounds and loud noises, you may want to pack a pair of noise-muting headphones (Bose type) or soft earplugs.

- Print boarding passes at home. This will eliminate one more line to stand in (unless you are checking bags).
- Call the airport and ask which TSA entry point is the best for disabled passengers to go through. Tell them your situation and request to go through the shorter line designated for disabled individuals / or Preferred-First Class passengers. The less time standing in line, the less likely a patience issue will develop.
- Tips for going through security;
 - Arrive at the airport 80 minutes prior to departure.
 - Don't wear anything with metal (belts) or have metal in pockets.
 - Kids 12 or under do not have to take their shoes off.
 - Talk to TSA onsite and request that you go through the metal-scanner instead of the "full body" scanner.
 - Have someone go through first, if possible, have another adult assist from behind.

Boarding the airplane

- Arrive at the gate 45 – 50 minutes before departure.
- Talk to the gate agent before you board. Tell them your situation, and tell them you would like to pre-board when they call for passengers that need extra time getting on the aircraft. This is usually done before they even board First Class. If you arrive late to the gate, just go to gate agent and they should let you in line. If you know patience is an issue, find an area that is not crowded near your the gate, wait until everybody else is on, and then get right on the plane.
- As you board, make sure items you will need for the flight (including some snacks and water) are in a backpack or large purse/bag that you can fit under the seat in front of you for quick/easy access. Do not put your "flight survival items" in an overhead bin, because you may not be able to get to them for up to 30 minutes (or longer). Just remember, if the fasten seatbelt sign is on (during taxi, de-icing, take-off, altitude climb, etc.), you cannot access anything in an overhead bin.
- It is also a good idea to have a book, fidget, view master, drawing materials or some other **NON-ELECTRONIC** entertainment at this point, since electronics are not allowed to be turned on until the flight crew allows.

Seating

- When booking the flight, put the individual in either the center seat if traveling with 2 adults, or the window seat. Also, you may want to book your tickets toward the front of the plane, so you can exit sooner.
- If you end up in a situation where you do not have seats together, talk to the flight attendant and explain the situation. Tell them you have a child with autism who cannot sit alone during the flight. They will find someone willing to switch seats with you.

Flight Time

- During take-off and landings, keep the individual busy with items you brought along (except electronics, they must be off for take-off and approach/landing).
- Pretend it is another great amusement park ride. If able, go to an amusement park and get on small – gentle rides / roller coasters as a prep for the flight.
- For possible pressurization issues, have the individual keep talking to you, swallow water, chew gum, or use a rubber oral sensory chewing tool while taking-off and descending to landing.
- During take-off and landings, the engines will get loud. Just say that it is like a friendly roar from a gentle lion. For sensitivity to sounds and loud noises, you may want to have a pair of noise-muting headphones or soft earplugs.
- Counting down from 10, 9, 8, 7...1, BLAST OFF or TOUCH DOWN as the plane starts to lift from the ground or land can also make it fun.

Enjoy the flight and vacation!