

# recreation

& fun

## Traveling with Children Who Have Special Needs

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**T**raveling with your family is a wonderful experience and can create enriching experiences and lasting memories. But planning for any trip is imperative and traveling with a child who has special needs can have its own unique set of challenges. Follow the tips below to make your trip as smooth and stress-free as possible for you and your family.

### Plan, Research and Plan Some More

A little preparation before your trip can go a long way. There are several things that you can research ahead of time. Start early so you have plenty of time to look into all the aspects that will suit your child's unique needs. Don't make your own airline or hotel reservations. If possible, enlist the help of a seasoned travel agent who has worked with many customers with special needs. The agent's expertise will be priceless. If you don't use a travel agent, be sure to let everyone you talk to while you are making your reservations know of your child's needs. Airlines and hotels will put a note in their computer with your reservation letting anyone who looks up your information see the notes about your child's special needs. Also, ask for confirmations of accommodations in writing.

### Ask For What You Need

Call ahead to each place you are visiting and let them know of you and your child's needs. Be firm about what you want. Walt Disney World and other amusement parks offer special passes for person with special needs.

You can also ask guest services at many destinations for information on additional requests, for example if you will need to schedule a visiting nurse to come and administer care for your child.

If you are planning to go to a show, be clear about what seating arrangement will best accommodate your child. Be very specific about what you need to ensure your child's safety and comfort. For example, an agent at a hotel or stadium may consider an area to be wheelchair accessible if they have seen a patron in a manual wheelchair maneuver a step or two. But for a child in a heavy, electric wheelchair, that same step may be impassable. Ask lots of questions, and when talking to employees, don't ask yes or no questions, like, "Are all of your doorways wheelchair accessible?" or "Will I be able to get my

child into the pool?" Ask "How wide are your doorways?" and "Is your pool equipped with a lift?" Again, planning well ahead of time will make all of this easier.



### Pack Everything but the Kitchen Sink

You won't really need to pack everything you own, but you do want to have plenty of items on hand just in case you need them. Start a list weeks before your trip, and write down everything you think of that your child will need *or could need*. Use this list while packing. If your child requires special medications or items such as an inhaler or Epi-pen to use in case of an emergency, DO NOT pack these items in luggage that will be checked on an airplane.

Have everything you could need in your carry-on bags, and don't forget to include any favorite toys or security items that could help your child feel calm and safe. Include prescription medicines your child takes, and a copy of the prescription itself in case the medicine gets lost. You will also want to get a letter from your physician detailing your child's condition and special needs. This will be handy in case your child needs medical attention on your trip, and you will need it in order to carry syringes or other items onboard an airplane. A letter from your doctor describing your child's conditions will also be helpful in securing special accommodations at hotels or attractions. Many theme parks offer special entrances or the chance for a patron to enter through the exit. These accommodations are not just available to those who have a mobility issue, but can be used by children with autism, a seizure disorder, or other less obvious impairments. Having a letter from your physician can help you gain these accommodations for your child.

### Slow Down

Every person, regardless of age or needs, must undergo screening to pass beyond the security checkpoints at airports. Be aware that every item, including equipment your child needs will need to go through the X-ray machine. According to the Transportation Security Administration, your child will never be separated from his or her equipment unless it is at your request. If your

child is in a wheelchair, or walks with crutches, these items will need to be inspected by the security screeners. You will also need to tell the screener if your child should be carried through the metal detector, walked through with support, or have a hand wand metal detector used.

Telling your child what to expect ahead of time can help diminish any anxiety during this practice. Be sure to remind your child that any bags or belongings he is carrying will need to go through the X-ray machine but that they will be returned to him shortly. If you are traveling with a child who is autistic or who has diminished mental capacities, it will be a good idea to practice the routine of going through security a few times at home ahead of time. You can also ask for a private screening if you think that will be beneficial. Inspecting your child's wheelchair or other equipment and handling a nervous or agitated child during the security

screening procedure can take extra time, so leave yourself plenty of time to catch your flight.

### Go for It

Traveling with children is rarely easy. But it's almost always worth the effort. Just keep in mind that you are giving a priceless gift to your child when you continue to keep the world open to him, and enrich his experiences as much as possible. With good planning, you can enjoy a wonderful vacation, and you will learn from your experiences so that it will be even easier the next time. Happy traveling! ■

## Travel Resources

### Web Resources

#### [www.travelintalk.net](http://www.travelintalk.net)

A global network of persons with disabilities who share information on their hometowns and places they have visited. The members provide accurate information on accommodations and services that are often needed by people with disabilities.

#### [www.travelguides.org/vaguide.html](http://www.travelguides.org/vaguide.html)

The Virginia Travel Guide for Persons with Disabilities is a Web site containing information obtained through on site visits and accessibility questionnaires on many popular attractions in Virginia. The Web site includes links to other states information.

### Books

- *Wheelchairs on the Go: Accessible Fun in Florida*  
by Michelle Stigleman, et al.
- *Great American Vacations for Travelers with Disabilities: With Complete Accessibility Information on Hotels, Restaurants and Attractions*  
(1st ed) by Fodor's.
- *Barrier-Free Travel: A Nuts and Bolts Guide for Wheelers and Slow Walkers*  
by Candy B Harrington.

