**Tips for Traveling With Challenging Children**

**How to minimize stress and maximize fun for everyone**

Traveling with children who are anxious, wary of change, or otherwise challenging can be daunting, precisely because it does what we expect vacations to do—take us away from the routine of home and expose us to new sights and sounds.

The temptation is to stay close to home to avoid adverse and unpredictable reactions and the possibility of meltdowns in public places. But the truth is: a kid with anxiety, autism, or any other hurdle is nevertheless 100% kid.

Shannon des Roches Rosa, autism mom, writer, and activist, sums it up well when she explains why she is adamant about taking her son on as many and various outings as possible. "Leo may have intense autism, but he is an able-bodied and energetic boy who craves adventure," she writes in a guest piece for [**SFGate.com**](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/blogs/lshumaker/detail?entry_id=92762). "We want Leo to be a boy-about-town so he gets used to being part of our community, and our community gets used to him."

Shannon, whose own blog is called[**Squidalicious**](http://www.squidalicious.com/), is writing about visits to museums and other local attractions, but the same argument applies to travel—it can be invaluable to your child's growth, as well as your own mental health. Here are some suggestions, assembled from various sources, to help you take control of your trip.

**Plan for Success**

Plan your vacation with an eye to those times when destinations are most easily accessible and tranquil. Crowds and long waits can make children especially anxious and provoke meltdowns, so go during off-peak hours and in the off-season, if possible.

In public places, it's good to keep a mental note of the exits, and have a backup plan for a discrete getaway if one is needed. Where, in a crowded plaza, is the closest quiet spot if you need to step aside and let your youngster calm down? If you're traveling by car, try to park close to the restaurant or attraction you're visiting, to avoid the prospect of a long trek past an audience of rubber-necked onlookers.

**Lay the Groundwork**As a parent, you try to anticipate which situations may pose the greatest challenges for a child. On plane rides, you'll want to have plenty of activities and supplies to engage her—games, books, coloring books, juiceboxes, movies, computers, or all of the above. If you have a child prone to running off, an ID bracelet gives you a little more peace of mind; dressing her in bright colors also makes it easier for you to keep her in sight.

But it's also crucial to let your child know what to expect of the upcoming trip—what new experiences she should anticipate, what might make it different from home, what might be challenging for her. She should know where she can turn for help. Going through photos of places or people a child will be meeting, or telling stories about good vacation experiences, can help a child focus her expectations in a positive way.

Or try actually writing a story about the upcoming trip, with your child as the main character. Autism consultant Carol Gray has developed a method called [**Social StoriesTM**](http://thegraycenter.org/social-stories), which is designed to be an engaging, interactive way of preparing children for social situations. The stories, written from the child's point of view, use narration, as well as photos and drawings, to guide the child through an experience, preparing him for social interactions that might be required and prompting desired responses. A story for a child on the autism spectrum about a trip to Florida might include travel details, things he might be nervous about, people he might meet, reassurance that his parents will be with him all the time, and activities he likes and can anticipate enjoying.

And so on. Social Stories can be used for any situation—using a public bathroom, going to school, riding on a plane. And of course, one of the best parts may be inviting your child to make it with you.

**A Little Familiarity Can't Hurt**If staying in hotels and eating at restaurants puts too much stress on your child—or on you to supervise her behavior—consider online apartment rentals, so you can cook some familiar meals, have more space for family down-time, bring a familiar blanket or toy, and keep some regular routines intact.If your child is especially skittish about new places, it may be a good compromise to revisit a familiar vacation spot where she's already had a good experience. She knows what to expect, and you get to increase the odds that you'll all be able to relax.

**Don't Be Shy—Ask for Help**

If your child needs special accommodations to make a travel experience rewarding, don't hesitate to ask for them.  Did you know that some airports are agreeable to "fake" security checks for children with autism, so you can practice the procedure in advance of the big day? Many establishments have extra amenities or special provisions that might be a godsend to you, but they probably don't advertise them. Restaurants can give you tables closer to the exit. Disneyland and Six Flags have special passes that allow kids to skip lines; some of these require proof that your child needs accommodation, so consider bringing documentation. Extra effort (and assertiveness) on the front end can cut your child needed slack later.

**Be Proud**And if you find your child drawing stares or censorious looks, don't let them spoil your vacation. Here des Roches Rosa is a role model. She write of her son Leo, "I do not care if other people think he behaves strangely or makes funny noises; as long as he is not harming or interrupting anyone, we carry on with heads raised, meeting stranger's stares with confident and unapologetic smiles that I will admit to having practiced in the bathroom mirror." Focus on making the experience good for your family.

**Failure Is an Option**A perfect vacation is impossible, but every vacation is perfectly instructional. What worked—and what didn't—can be logged in your inventory of subsequent to-dos and not-to-dos. What was surprisingly successful, and what will you avoid next time? As des Roches Rosa wisely tries to do, think of failure as an investment in future success.

**Additional info added to the article - TRANSITION**When you return home after a vacation or trip, children with FASD have difficulty with the transition of coming down from the high associated with a vacation or trip. Try to find a fun or positive thing immediately after you come home, go to a favourite restaurant, favourite activity, etc. Also, don’t bring in the luggage right away, it provides a strong visual signal that it is over. You may want to bring in the luggage after your child has gone to bed … try to downplay the return.