

AIR TRAVEL TIPS & TECHNIQUES: CHILDREN WITH ASD

As you may already know, routine is critical for children with ASD, especially during air travel, due to the many unpredictable factors during its journey. Check out these tips and techniques to help you and your family on your next trip.

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU MADE IT.

Each trip will get easier, and both you as parents and the child(ren) will get more comfortable, and a routine that works for you all will settle in. You will not regret the joy and the memories you will be able to provide your family. Preparedness is critical, and we hope these tips and techniques will help make your air travel experience less daunting and stressful.



PACKING AND PRE-TRIP PREPARATIONS



BOOK EARLY

Book your trip as far in advance to help prepare your child to formulate a routine through rehearsals (based on your child's needs). Booking early provides more options for seat selections for your trip.



SEATING

Aim to pick seats towards the front of the aircraft, which minimizes the stress of walking to the back of the plane, which can feel more restricted. A window seat can provide comfort, especially if they can see out.

Based on the family size and aircraft configuration, have at least one family member next to and in front of the child for comfort and possible seat kicking.



CREATE EXCITEMENT

After your trip is confirmed, circle the event on the calendar, like a birthday or Christmas, to make the rehearsals for routing exciting and not dreadful.



SHOW PICTURES

Show your child pictures of the destination or the family to create a sense of excitement at the end of the trip.



PRACTICING

Maps showing distance can give them a sense of space and time. Draw storyboards of how the day will go to provide them with a mental picture of travel events.

Rehearse as often as needed based on your child's needs, including "dry runs" to the airport, to help with the timing of how the travel day will go.



PERSONAL PACK

Purchase a small roll bag or backpack for your child. Let the child pack their bag the night before and on dry runs with all their comforts of home (blankets, stuffed animals, books, iPads, noise-canceling headsets, etc.), as this will add to their excitement and bring comfort and ease during periods of delay or sensory overloads. Make sure the bag is small enough to fit under the seat in front of to be accessed during the flight.

PARENTS PACK

Parents should also bring a small bag to fit under their front seat. Pack medications that would need to be accessed (ex: prescriptions or motion sickness pills) and any food or snacks that would bring comfort to your child or in case the child has any food allergies or special dietary needs. Since liquids more than 3.5 ounces cannot pass through security, bring an empty water bottle to be filled inside the secure area or purchase as necessary.

Items not necessary for carry-on should be checked in to help free up your hands. The less you carry, the more you can focus on your child. Avoid baggage fees using a Delta AMEX card.



STREAMING ONLINE

Nearly all Delta flights are equipped with Wi-Fi to stream movies, TV, and games right to your tablet or smartphone. Just download the GOGO entertainment app for free and launch when above 10,000 ft. Also, a fair portion of our aircraft have monitors built into the seat so you can access free entertainment. The Wi-Fi is free when using the GOGO app or connecting to delta.com. There is a charge for surfing the internet, and most aircraft also have USB and charging ports for your device. Remember to have everything fully charged before boarding and consider bringing a backup/charging battery just in case.



DESCENDING

Descent is another potential sensory issue. The pressure change can be uncomfortable for a child with sensory issues as the cabin pressure increases and lower pressure air in the inner ear can get trapped. The pilot will make a PA informing the passengers and crew of impending descent.

To help prepare and minimize this, have the child sip water, chew gum, suck on a piece of hard candy, or make "funny" faces to stretch the jaw and help open the tubes in the inner ear to release the pressure. This can be highly uncomfortable, especially in younger children.

LANDING

Landing is the last sensory hurdle. As you get closer to the ground, there is a higher chance of encountering turbulence. The landing gear will extend and increase the noise in the cabin, and after touchdown, the engines will go into reverse thrust, which can be extremely loud, especially if seated near the engines and wing. Use the same techniques in preparedness as for the takeoff.



ARRIVAL GATE

If possible, at the arrival gate and based on your child's anxiety level and time constraints, remain in your seat until the other passengers exit the aircraft. This time can get quite stressful and claustrophobic while passengers flood the aisle, get their baggage, and cram into a small space. The aisle might not be clear for several minutes based on the size of the aircraft and when the door opens. You can get your child into a confining moment that may create a sensory overload.



PLANNING YOUR EXIT

Check the Delta app to see what gate you have arrived at and what connecting gate you have. Use the app or Google to pull up a map of the arriving airport to help plan your exit to baggage claim or your next gate.



ONBOARD AIRCRAFT EN ROUTE TO DESTINATION



GETTING READY FOR TAKE OFF

Once your child is seated, have them use their comfort items from home to create their own environment and settle as quickly as possible to distract from the flight if anxiety is high. If at a window seat, use the shade accordingly based on your child's needs and stress level. For example, my child wanted to look out the window to get a sense of movement and location, creating less confinement, but for others, it might be too much to take in on a sensory level.



CALL BUTTONS

Identify the location of the Flight Attendant call button. On older airplanes, it will be above your head next to the reading lights and air vents. With newer equipment, it will be on your in-seat monitor as a touch screen icon under settings. If still unfamiliar, ask the flight attendant directly.

If age is applicable, inform your child that it is a "mommy, daddy" switch. Children like the sound it makes and can press repeatedly. We don't want to distract the crew from their duties unnecessarily, but please use them if needed, as they are there to help. Informing the flight attendants during pre-board will help prepare them to handle a meltdown or any other situation.

TAKING OFF

The takeoff and initial climb out will be extremely loud. The pilots will make a PA when close to the runway, right before takeoff. The noise change is sudden, as well as the rapid speed change. A lot is going on sensory-wise during this phase of flight, so prepare your child for this based on their needs. Bring noise-canceling headsets if possible. If seated near or above the wing, landing gear retraction will also be noisy. It is short-lived, but you may need to prepare for this.

The engines will reduce power, and the sudden changes in noise and speed will settle into a steadier white noise scenario, and the speed will be less felt as altitude is gained. Again, use the window shade based on the child's needs.

TURBULENCE

Turbulence is unpredictable. Pilots do their best to avoid turbulence and will inform the passengers and crew based on the data we receive, but sometimes it is unavoidable. Turbulence will also be more likely felt closer to the ground in the summer afternoons on hot days and in the winter on cold, windy days. You can prepare your child at home with some techniques, like sitting in a chair and shaking it gently, then slowly building and practicing the sensation over, driving down a bumpy road, or pulling them in a wagon or something similar down a bumpy path. Make a fun game of it, so when it is encountered, you can refer to the techniques you used, and they will have a sense of comparison.

AIRSICK

If your child gets car sick easily, they could most likely get airsick. Consult your physician on which medication to use to help combat the issue and inform the flight attendant to be prepared.



BOOSTER SEATS & STROLLERS

For younger children, avoid bringing car or booster seats since they are challenging to carry thru airports and security. You cannot use them on aircraft and must be gate-checked. Most rental car companies offer both types of seats for rent. If visiting family, ask them to keep or borrow a spare set. Compact strollers are ideal for navigating your child thru a busy, big airport and can be gate checked to be retrieved at the destination in the jetway.



CHECKING IN

Check in to your flight the night before on Delta.com or Delta app. You can print your boarding passes at home or send a link to open on your smartphone via email or text message. You can also include the number of bags to be checked online (and pay any fees or use Delta AMEX to avoid fees), saving you time when arriving at the airport. Checking in will note your bags into the system for faster processing.



SKY CAB

We recommend using a sky cab at the curb. The lines are shorter, and the process is fast with bag notes in the system. It is an extra service, and tips go a long way, but they work hard, and you will save time.



CHECKING FOR DELAYS

Use Delta.com or the Delta app to check for any delays the night before and the day of to save time at the airport. You can also check the day of to see gate information and pull up maps of airports for navigating thru the airport.



ARRIVING AT THE AIRPORT AND SECURITY



EXTRA TIME

Plan to give yourself more time than you think you will need. Parking, security, and travel time to the gate can take much longer than expected and can add unnecessary stress to your trip.

Check for weather or traffic delays, and plan to arrive at the airport approximately 90 minutes before domestic flights and 2.5 hours before international flights (maybe earlier, depending on your child's needs and anxiety level).



TSA CARES

Call the TSA Cares phone number 72 hours before check-in at 1-855-787-2227 (available 8a-11p weekdays and 9a-8p weekends). TSA Cares is a valuable tool, especially at large busy airports like Atlanta. At most airports, a TSA representative will meet you at a designated area and escort you to the shortest lines and even thru, depending on your child's needs.



EXPEDITING SECURITY

Other programs to expedite your security experience include TSA pre-check and the CLEAR program. For international travel, consider Global Entry. These programs have paperwork and fees, so research online for more details.

Preview all security procedures on [TSA.gov](https://www.tsa.gov), be prepared, and comply. You do not want to complicate the process and put any undo time and stress at the start of the process. The security line is a sensory overload, and being prepared will help you get through security quickly.



THE "DIVIDE & CONQUER" TECHNIQUE: ARRIVING

The "divide and conquer" technique is helpful if traveling with both parents or two trusted adults. The child and one parent can be dropped off at the designated TSA meeting place with boarding passes and personal items. They can be escorted through security and be on their way to the gate to get settled or to a quiet location at the airport. At the same time, the other parent handles checking the bags, parking the car, or any other time-consuming preflight tasks, minimizing the time the child must wait or be put in sensory overload situations. If traveling as a single parent, have a friend or relatives drop you at the airport or Uber/Lyft to a designated point and continue with TSA.



GATE CHANGES

Check the gate assignment on the departures board or on your phone for any last-minute gate changes to ensure you are in the correct security line and avoid running between gates.



AIRPORT TRANSIT

Proceed to the gate using airport maps on the Delta app to help navigate and view any available airport transit (i.e. underground train in Atlanta) based on your child's needs. If you have extra time or your child enjoys it, consider riding the train longer as a special treat. They will also remember that as fun and want to come back.

BOARDING TECHNIQUES AT THE GATE



DEALING WITH DELAYS

Upon arriving at the gate, check for any delays. If any, find a quiet area, if possible, to keep your child calm and occupied (with food or their favorite activity). Look for an empty gate at the end of the terminal. Atlanta has a sensory room in Concourse F, next to the food court, for use if time permits. Find a customer service agent for access.



ASKING FOR ASSISTANCE

We can't help you unless you let us know your situation and child's condition. Let the gate agent know as soon as practical, so they can assist in any way needed or with early boarding, late boarding, checking car seats if applicable, etc.

One discreet technique is to write on a piece of paper or make up a laminate card with the child's name, age, and condition to present to any pertinent employees along the way, i.e., gate agents, flight attendants, etc.



THE DIVIDE & CONQUER TECHNIQUE: BOARDING

If possible, use the "divide and conquer" technique for boarding. One parent can board early to set up the "nest" by getting seated, having all the carry-ons stored under the seat, and having any comfort items out and ready for use once the child boards. Also, that parent can discreetly inform the flight attendants personally or with a laminated card of your situation and seat assignments. They have many people to deal with, but if informed, they can help assist better if any situation arises during the flight.

Meanwhile, the other parent can stay with the child in the boarding area or just slightly away in a less congested area and wait to board last. The jetway can get very congested and confined, and this can cause overload issues. Boarding last will allow the jetway to clear and minimize the time sitting on the idol on the aircraft. Then the seating area is prepared, the child sits with their comfort items and awaiting parent, the door closes, and you are on the way.



LAVATORY

Most aircraft now have a vacuum-type suction flusher in lavatories which can be extremely loud and scary for the child in a confined area. Depending on the age and child's condition, plan accordingly, and you may have the child exit the lavatory and then go in and flush after.

