

## Going on Holiday



**Access to reliable and useful information is important for understanding the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum. Not only are individual's lives dramatically affected but the lives of their families, friends, schools and colleagues are too. Based on our knowledge and understanding of common challenges that arise, we continually develop our information resources on a range of day-to-day topics and issues. Our fact sheets help many to understand, develop practical skills and build confidence when interacting with someone on the autism spectrum.**

Going on holiday with a child or adult on the autism spectrum can be a challenging prospect. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. There may be issues with adapting to change, to a new environment or in supporting the individual to manage various forms of transport, new routines and new activities.

Many families successfully take holidays, both close to home and abroad. Success can be dependent on the

circumstances and the planning which has taken place prior to going on holiday. The following is indicative of the range of things that a family may need to consider to ensure a successful and enjoyable family break. The guidance offered here is intended to encompass a broad range of potential issues. Not all of it will be applicable to all individuals and families.

**Taking some time to consider the impact of the person's autism, and how best to support them will reap dividends. Some things to think about include:**

- The person's ability to think flexibly. This may impact on their ability to imagine, plan ahead and react flexibly to change
- Level of understanding of information. This may include understanding of verbal language. The extent to which the person can express themselves and their needs and fears.
- How able is the person to understand and respond to other people?
- Does the person have any sensory processing issues such as over-sensitivity to noise or difficulties within particular environments?
- On a more positive note, the likes and 'passions' that people on the spectrum often have can perhaps be accommodated into holidays (and wherever possible should), although this may not be so popular with other family members...

**There are a number of things to think about in the lead up to the holiday, the preparation phase, as well as on the holiday itself. Some areas to consider are:**

- The length of the time to wait before going on holiday causing anxiety. Deciding how far in advance to tell the person and start to get them involved is important. Your prior knowledge of your child or adult will be essential in making this decision.
- Previous experience of difficulty on holiday may have created negative perceptions for the person and or for other family members. It is important to feel that the situation is manageable and will be positive and enjoyable. Selecting the right type of holiday and getting the duration right will therefore be important.
- Try to identify any potential difficulties that may arise as a result of the upcoming change to routine
- There may be apprehension about particular modes of transport. Think also about the person's ability to wait, cope with crowds and new experiences.
- During the holiday difficulties may arise due to the person's perception of the holiday being different to the reality (e.g. thinking they would be at the tractor fair all the time)
- The accommodation environment may impact on sensory processing difficulties (e.g. colour; noise; smell; temperature).
- The availability of familiar foods may be limited.
- The person may have a poor or confused understanding of how long the holiday will last.

- The needs of other family members can become marginalised and this too can impact on the holiday being less than successful or even terminated early.

It is generally recognised that individuals on the spectrum have some degree of difficulty transitioning from one environment to another. Going away on holiday certainly constitutes a very large transition. An important aspect of any transition is that it is properly structured and the person is appropriately supported.

**Good planning is of the essence when it comes to holidays. For many people this is part of the fun. When supporting a child or young person on the autism spectrum some aspects of holiday planning have to be extended and thought through in much greater detail than you might typically expect.**

Factors to take into consideration include:

- The time and distance to travel and mode of transport.
- The duration of the holiday and any additional supports that may be required by the individual or the family.
- Plan a strong structure to the holiday. This will include the environment, activities and type of food available at the destination and contingency plans if difficulties arise.
- All of these factors will vary from person to person and will be guided by knowledge of them and their experience of previous holidays.
- Involving the person in holiday planning is a positive approach to aim for. This will involve ensuring there is concrete information available to the person. Timing is everything. Care is needed not to introduce the idea of the holiday too far in advance. Similarly it is important not to delay the giving of information too long as the person may need time to process the information given to them. These sorts of decisions are really based on deep knowledge of the individual.
- Choice of destination may also be difficult on a conceptual level. If planning with the person is an option, try to access as much concrete information as possible. Examples are basing the holiday on a previously enjoyed location (using photos, videos and 'objects of reference' such as souvenirs, leaflets, etc). Accessing 'concrete' promotional material such as photos from brochures and websites and videos. This will give the person a concrete frame of reference to support their difficulty with flexible thinking.

While it is generally good practice to provide advance information on upcoming events, tolerance of this varies from person to person. This may be impacted by their actual understanding of the timescale involved and best efforts should be made to increase this knowledge in a concrete way such as a calendar or planner (which should also be used on holiday to show how long till the return home).

If these supports aren't yet used, Speech and Language Therapy may be able to offer advice on introducing them proactively. The age-old method of '9 more sleeps...8 more sleeps, etc' can be helpful when visually linked to a concrete planner or calendar. This can be done by simply having a picture (or whatever visual the person understands) of a bed each day up until the event, and crossing it out each morning to show how many days remain. A word of caution is however needed here. This approach relies on the person's concept of a "sleep" being a full night. Many children and young people experience disturbed sleep and are frequently awake during the night. Difficulties with counting "sleeps" can arise if the person's perception of a full night's sleep differs from the intended meaning. A personal decision will however need to be made on when best to announce the upcoming holiday.

**When on holiday this type of planner (or a daily schedule) can be useful. It can be used to show the duration of the holiday. You never know, with all the support you've put in it may be so good the person may not want to come home! This is all the more reason for counting down to the return date. It can also give each day some structure. Important information to show should include:**

- The order of everyday events such as mealtimes and bedtime routine, together with the day's activities. This inevitably involves careful forward planning and some people may feel that it lacks spontaneity; however this may make the difference between the holiday being a success and a disappointment.
- Consider a graded approach to holidays, going progressively further afield and to a range of venues. This may enable the person to eventually enjoy a wider range of holidays. This will also be helpful if unexpected change should happen in the future (e.g. the holiday caravan site closing down). Starting holidays at an early age may also assist in establishing this as part of the family routine.

If there are several children and conflicting interests, some families try taking separate holidays, with one parent going with the child on the spectrum and the other parent with the others. It would be hoped that this could be a short term measure, leading to shared holidays further down the line.

Think small: a holiday consisting solely of a day or two spent enjoyably will be worth so much more than a week of endurance. In addition it will lay down positive associations of holidays hopefully leading to a longer break next time.

Checking out a destination in advance will undoubtedly be helpful. Some parents opt to visit the location first to check suitability. While this may not be necessary or possible for every family, the principle of checking out as many factors as possible is very useful. It may help to access a photo of the actual accommodation and bedroom, however it's important not to present this in absolute terms as things may change. Some families find it helps to take the child's actual pillow or a treasured comforter. You will know your child and whether this may help!

On arrival, a 'risk assessment' of accommodation and locations, as you would probably normally carry out for your son or daughter, will contribute to things going smoothly.

**Whilst on holiday, small, daily transitions can be difficult. Ways to make these as smooth as possible should be considered. The daily planner/schedule discussed earlier should assist, as will knowledge of how the person usually responds. You may need to factor in some strategies for this.**

For instance:

- If waiting is difficult, can quieter times of day reduce the need to queue?
- Visual supports can also be invaluable here, for instance to show ways in which waiting time can be monitored. If your son or daughter doesn't understand a watch or clock then try a 'Time-Timer' ([www.timetimer.com](http://www.timetimer.com)) or other form of timer (visual rather than an alarm) linked to a picture of what is happening next. If this is also too abstract for the person, then more concrete ways of measuring time could include 'when this song/CD's finished; when this comics finished', etc., using activities that you know will last the appropriate length of time.
- If the person isn't able to use a schedule, another useful visual support for transitions is a signifier of what is happening next. An example would be carrying the menu for the restaurant you're going to or swimming kit representing swimming.

If not already used, it is advisable to teach skills such as using a timer, schedule or planner, well in advance of the holiday. Long term practice will help the person to feel familiar with using the new technique.

A well stocked 'emergency kit bag' is a useful strategy to have – this could be a small rucksack containing enjoyable activities, 'distracting' activities, food and drink, spare clothing, etc. Think especially of items that will help to reduce anxiety such as a battery operated fan; music player and headphones; cooling wipes and a fragrance that calms the person.

If the worst happens and the person should wander off or become lost, a form of identification in an easily observable position on their clothing will help enormously (even if they can usually give their identification details, in a new and stressful setting this will be much harder). An example might be a discreet ID holder securely attached to a belt loop. If relevant, any emergency medical requirements should also be included.

Take time after the holiday to reflect on successes and difficulties and how you can learn from them for next time. Remember also that the child or adult may have other needs and/or skills by then which will also need to be factored in.



**Going away on holiday is a large transition. It needs to be properly structured and supported appropriately.**



### **Suggested books/reading material:**

**Betts, E.D. & Patrick, N.J. (2006) *Homespun Remedies:*** Strategies in the Home and Community for Children with Autism Spectrum and Other Disorders. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

**Central Scotland Area Services (2009) *Service User Holiday Planning Pack.*** Scottish Autism Internal Resource

**Gray, C. & White, A.L. (2002) *My Social Stories Book.*** Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.