

Supporting Autistic children for air travel



Travelling by airplane can be exciting, but it can also involve sensory, social, and other challenges for Autistic children.

Being well-prepared, understanding your child's individual needs, helping them understand what will happen, and planning for flexibility can help make the experience easier for everyone.

It is really helpful to teach children about airports and air travel.

General principles:

- Give yourself plenty of time, be patient and go step by step
- Include your child in the process as much as they are able or prefer
- Plan for change (delay, diversion etc).

Showing children what to expect and teaching skills can help alleviate anxiety and help the travel day run smoother.

Key skills:

- Learning to queue and to wait
- Holding onto a small travel bag
- Wearing noise-cancelling headphones
- General sensory coping skills & coping with change
- Occupying time when sitting
- Sitting with a seatbelt

**Our purpose
a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging
& celebrating the strengths,
interests & aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

Make the unknown more familiar



Doing something unfamiliar can be nerve-racking for anyone.

This is particularly true for Autistic children. Showing them what to expect can help alleviate anxiety and help the travel day run smoother.

General knowledge about airport procedures:

- Where possible, visit the airport beforehand or watch virtual tours online with your child to help familiarise them with the environment
- Watch YouTube videos and vlogs that detail the experience of going on a flight.

TIP: When selecting a YouTube video to watch, it is helpful to search for the exact airline, aircraft and seating class that you will be travelling e.g. 'Qantas domestic 737 economy'.

- Practice by role playing at home e.g. pretend to go through security, sit in a plane seat, wear seatbelts, and listen for announcements. This is a good time to explain the rules and expectations of flying
- Prepare a visual story of the travel day and what they will need to do.

TIP: This should include details about the various stages of the journey through the airport, what the cabin is like, sensory aspects such as the sound of the engine and what it feels like when your ears pop. It is helpful to include where there may be change e.g. sometimes there are delays.

- Where possible, visit the airport beforehand. Get to know the spaces and process and find places to enjoy.

TIP: In some Australian domestic airports, it is possible to visit the airport, practice going through the security process and explore shops and food courts without having a booked flight.

Carry-on luggage: Packing for success

- **Pack sensory tools** based on an individual's sensory profile. This may include items such as weighted blankets, lap pads, fidget toys, chewable jewellery, noise-cancelling headphones or sunglasses
- **Bring plenty of snacks** and preferred 'safe foods'. This can serve as a distraction, as well as ensuring plenty of preferred food is available. This is particularly important on longer flights.
- **A fully charged device**, loaded with an abundance of preferred content, headphones and a charging cord (as well as socket charger as not all airplanes have USB chargers).
- **Pack chewy snacks, lollipops, or drinks** to help with ear popping. Keep these as a surprise treat so they don't get eaten before they are needed!
- **Pack an 'entertainment pack'** consisting of small toys/activities based around your child's interests. Keep these with you and unveil each item individually as needed to reduce boredom over the flight.
- **Dress your child in comfortable clothes** and have appropriate layers in case cold on the airplane. It also helps to have a spare change of clothes in case of drink spillages etc.
- **Use a Hidden Disability Sunflower lanyard.** You can get this ahead of time ([HERE](#)) or at the airport. Wearing this is an indicator that a person may require a little extra assistance or patience.



Communicate your child's support needs



Communicating support needs should be done with the airline ahead of travel.

The Hidden Disability airline code (DPNA) can be added to the booking which assists in advising ground & cabin crew that you may require additional assistance.

Pre-flight

- Visit the airlines website and reach out to the airline to understand what supports are available.
- Wear a Sunflower's Hidden Disability lanyard to indicate extra assistance may be required.
- Follow up whether there are any quiet rooms or sensory spaces in the airports being visited.
- Select seating in line with individual needs e.g. window seats may reduce sensory overload, whereas aisle seats can allow easier access to bathrooms or movement breaks. Communicate with the airline in advance regarding any specific requests.

At the airport

- Arrive early to allow time to adjust to the environment and avoid rushing.
- Some airlines have dedicated check-in lanes for passengers requiring assistance. If using the self serve kiosks, please speak with the airline customer service representative for assistance.
- Some airports will offer additional supports through airport security for passengers with a hidden disability. This is usually indicated by a Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lane.
- Allow adequate time to get to the gate before departure. Most airlines communicate the recommended times.
- Some Autistic people may feel more comfortable pre-boarding so they are settled before other passengers board the airplane. This can be organised by speaking to the airline customer service representatives prior to the commencement of boarding.
- Some Autistic people may prefer to board last to avoid spending any longer than necessary on the airplane. This can be done, simply by waiting for other passengers to go ahead of you.

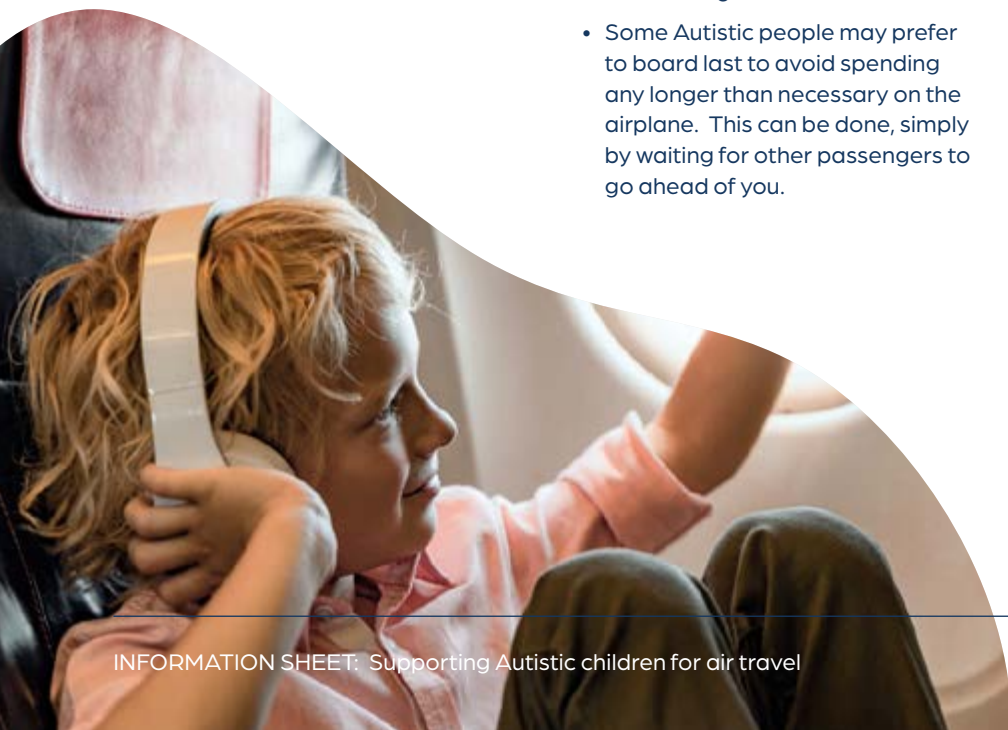
Getting on the plane

Being calm and comfortable assists in a well-regulated start to the flight.

- Board and take designated seat. Once comfortably seated, remind your child as to what to expect in regard to take-off and have fidget tools and candy (for ear-popping) handy.
- Set up any entertainment that may help serve as a distraction for take-off.

During the flight

- Communicate with cabin crew and let them know you have specific needs or may require assistance during the flight.
- During take-off and landing it's important to remain seated with seatbelt on and listen to all crew instructions. The cabin pressure may change and there may be a lot of movement of crew throughout the cabin. Use sensory tools and calming techniques where necessary.
- Stay hydrated and where possible encourage stretching and movement.
- Try to time toilet breaks so that there is adequate time prior to landing.
- Changes weather conditions can cause turbulence. Listen to crew instructions and use sensory tools as necessary to support emotional regulation.



Plan for delays and unexpected changes

Delays, missed flights, changes to flights and cancellations are a common part of any travel, but can be extremely challenging for Autistic people.

As such, it is important to prepare for the possibility that even the most well-prepared travel day may detour from the plan.

- When creating a visual story for the trip, ensure to add in information about how sometimes things don't go to plan and what will happen in the event of a delay or change.
- Plan your journey to the airport with plenty of buffer time. Not having to rush helps with emotional regulation and also allows enough time to deal with unexpected things such as traffic, break-downs, or a really crowded airport.
- Ahead of time, investigate and identify places in the airport that could be useful in the event of emotional dysregulation e.g. quiet rooms/quieter parts of the airport, food options etc.
- If a change or delay does happen, try to model emotional regulation as best you can. Children generally are led by their parent's/caregiver's responses in stressful situations. Be clear about what will happen (that you will still get to go to your destination).

Review each journey as a learning opportunity

Sometimes first flights go really smoothly, and others will be a 'learning experience for next time'. It is important to celebrate the successes as well note what could be improved upon next time.

- Discuss what went well, what was difficult and what you could do differently next time.
- Acknowledge how well they did in managing the journey.
- Reach out to the airline with feedback for the things that did go well or things that could be improved.

We are committed to making life better for people on the spectrum.



For more information

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