

Autism friendly holidays

Author: Consultant Clinical Psychologist & Clinical Lead at Options Barton – Dr Andrew W. McAnespie



Introduction

What do you think about when you consider a holiday from school or work? ... Days out, visiting new places, travelling on an aeroplane, staying in a hotel, meeting new people, and trying new foods... lots of exciting change?

Unfortunately, any kind of change, even seemingly small ones, could cause distress and discomfort for a person with autism. Change removes the predictability and reliability that people with autism like and is a source of stress, making them feel vulnerable and scared. Holidays from school or work can be a cause of anxiety for a person with autism due to the break from their predictable routine.

The best way to ease a person's anxiety about change and transition is to provide as much predictability and consistency as possible and support them to understand what is happening and what will happen next.

In this issue we offer advice and guidance for parents and carers who look after children, young people and adults with autism, so that holidays can be a more enjoyable and less stressful time for all involved.

Ease into the holidays

Preparation is fundamental to easing into the holidays and making the transition less stressful for a person with autism.

- A visual calendar to count down the days until the holidays commence allows the person with autism time to process and envisage when the change is going to take place, how long the holidays will last for, and when they will be over and they will return to their normal routine.
- Looking at photos from previous holidays helps the person with autism to process what will be happening, what activities they may do, and help to remember things they have enjoyed from former vacations.
- Making an "All About Me" profile can help reduce anxiety in the person with autism as this allows them to express their likes, dislikes, needs and wants – allowing them choice; and it can also be given to people they will interact with during the holidays.

Plan the holidays

Planning what you are going to do during the holidays in advance gives you chance to:

- Gather all the information you need to make an activity planner, such as, where you are going, what activities you are going to do, who you will be seeing and doing activities with, and the duration of each part of the holiday.
- Create a timetable including mealtimes and bedtime routines.
- Familiarise yourselves with where you are going and what you are doing by showing the websites or pictures of your destination and/or planned activities. However, if the person with autism is very literal caution needs to be used in case the holiday is not exactly the same as the photos.
- Write plans and rules together where appropriate.
- Create social stories for new routines and behavioural expectations, for example, going to new places, using public transport, visiting relatives.
- Inform relatives, club leaders, airport staff, hotel staff, public venue personnel etc. of the needs of the person with autism where appropriate, so that they can offer support where possible and be prepared for possible eventualities. For example, Manchester Airport have an Airport Awareness Pack that they will send out in advance upon request www.manchesterairport.co.uk/at-the-airport/special-assistance/autism-awareness/ and provide assistance so there is no need to wait in queues, and the aeroplane can be boarded first.
- Make any practice runs necessary, for example, visiting the airport beforehand if the person with autism has never flown on an aeroplane before.
- Practice through role play, for example, taking a bus, visiting the zoo, greeting family members.
- Create a reward chart specific to the holidays.
- If the person with autism has a limited diet, pack foods that they enjoy.
- Discuss any medical needs with your GP beforehand.

Managing arousal levels

Holidays can be very exciting and stimulating, and may become too much at times. It is a good idea to be prepared for managing sensory needs and input.

- Decide on how much sensory input the person with autism can tolerate in advance.
- Block out time for breaks and decide on a quiet spot to take time out in.
- Allow transition time between activities.

- Arrive early at your destination so that noise and crowds build up slowly.
- Pack favourite toys or items that soothe, for example, headphones and favourite music.
- Pack preferred therapeutic tools, for example, ear defenders, fiddles, weighted blanket.
- Be vigilant of signs of distress or a meltdown ~ approaching.
- Plan ahead in event of the person with autism taking flight, for example, identify a safe space to retreat to, such as, their favourite room in a museum.

Back to Normal

It is also important to plan the transition back to a normal routine.

- A visual calendar can be used to count down the days until they return to school, work, home etc.
- Discuss what will happen and who they will see on their first day back to their normal routine.
- Look at photos together of their home, school, teachers, workplace, colleagues etc.

Ideas of places to visit and that have special offers, discounts and/or support in place for people with autism can be found on the following websites:

- www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/holidays-trips.aspx
- www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/holidays-trips/family-ideas.aspx
- www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/holidays-trips/planning.aspx

Spread the word...

If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our clinical team. If you would like us to cover any particular subjects around autism in future editions then please let us know by emailing info@optionsautism.co.uk

The complete series of help sheets can be found on our website www.optionsautism.co.uk/resources

For further information about our services:

call: 08442 487187 | **email:** info@optionsautism.co.uk | **website:** www.optionsautism.co.uk