

# Air Travel Guide



If you plan ahead, you can make an airplane trip easier for your family. Will the trip have stress? Yes, because it may be new. But it can also help your family grow and learn. Stress can happen, because airports and airplanes are busy with people moving fast and lots of noise and rules[1]. Remember: travel is a great way for your child to make their world bigger and work on being social and being confident[2].



*Waiting at your gate*

## BEFORE YOU GO

- **Your Airline:** Check your airline's website for "accessible travel services"[3] or "special travel needs"[4], and call your airline to talk over your needs.

Most airlines will provide an assistant to walk you through the various steps in the airport, but only if you ask them for it, and it is best to do this early[3].

If you selected specific seats online, especially if tickets were bought from a website not run by the airline, you may not get the seats you chose unless you ask for them directly from the airline on the phone, or at an airport counter.

If you search online for the name of your airline followed by "safety video" you will be able to see some version of the video you will see on your flight—it might be good for your child to see this so that they can begin to become familiar with the inside of a plane and the video they will see on the plane.

- **Your Airports:** Check the websites and call customer service for the airports you will be passing through, especially ones in which you'll go through a security checkpoint: Some airports have a sensory room, kids lounge, informational courses for first time flyers, and other services[5] that you may not hear about unless you ask.

- **Practice simulations:** Arc provides pretend airports for people with disabilities to practice going through security checkpoints. Check this website to see when a session is being held near you: <https://www.thearc.org/wingsforautism>

The security checkpoint is an important step to talk about and practice because your child



*Security Checkpoint*

will have to let go of things like sound canceling headphones and tablets for a short while, and have to cooperate with strangers. See "Security Checkpoint" below for more preparation tips.

## The Plan:

Talk through the whole experience with your child, especially the sensory issues, like:

- The nearness to many strangers
- The restraint of the seatbelt (which has to be worn if the seatbelt light is on)
- The movements of the plane (takeoff, turbulence and landing)
- The bad smells in the recycled air
- The dryness of air
- The loud noises (engines and some toilets flushing)

## The various steps include:

- Check-in at your airline's departure desk
- Security checkpoint
- Finding your departure gate
- Waiting for your flight
- Boarding the plane
- Flying—safety instructions, takeoff, using the bathroom, meals, landing
- Exiting the plane
- Finding the way to baggage claim
- Getting out of the airport
- Come up with an activity plan for waiting periods and the airplane.
- Allow your child to add to the plan if they want to.

If you search for "airplane social story" videos or images online, you can find many examples

that show each step of going through an airport and boarding plane. Keep in mind that every airport and every plane will look different.

You could construct the layout of a plane if you have access to a room full of folding chairs, or perhaps you could simply mark out boundaries with tape on the ground showing where and how large aisles are. When you buy tickets online and pick seats, you will see a map of the inside of the airplane—this may be a good image to save if this is important to you.

You could also use a car and pretend like it is an airplane for practice; because of the movement, seatbelts and tight spaces, riding in a car has many similarities with riding in a plane.

**The Kit:** Build a kit of things for your child. This could include:

- Favorite toys, games, fidget busters, crafts, and so on
- Audiovisual entertainment like tablets and gaming systems
- Sensory aids like earplugs or sound canceling device headphones, weighted blanket, and so on
- Snacks
- Bags in case of motion sickness—airplanes usually have these, but sometimes they aren't easy to grab and use
- Medications
- Anything small that could make surroundings look more familiar, like a picture that normally is in their bedroom

## DURING YOUR TRIP

### CHECK-IN:

Arrive early! You can check the waiting time at security if you have this free app on your phone: My TSA. If you selected specific seats online, especially if tickets were bought from a website not run by the airline, you may not get the seats you chose unless you ask for them directly from the airline. While checking in is a great time to ask if you haven't checked on the phone already. Recently, checking in has become a step that you do online the day before your flight. You can still ask questions at airlines' check-in counters.

**SECURITY CHECKPOINT:** This and boarding the plane are two of the harder steps in air travel[1]. After checking in, everyone traveling on an airplane must go through several security steps, but if you are traveling with children or people with special needs, there are things you can do to make this process easier.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the agency in charge of these checkpoints in the USA, has a website with

information and videos for many different disabilities: [tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures](https://tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures) (select "Autism or Intellectual Disabilities" from the drop-down menu halfway down the page)

The TSA has a "notification card" available online that you can print, fill out and hand to the agents at the checkpoint: [tsa.gov/sites/default/files/disability\\_notification\\_card\\_508.pdf](https://tsa.gov/sites/default/files/disability_notification_card_508.pdf)

By showing this card the agents will understand your child and the help you need. You can request a shorter line or to move to the front of a line[1].

The TSA has an information hotline: (855) 787-2227. Call this number so you can—

—ask for a Personal Support Specialist to guide you through the security checkpoint. Do this a week before your trip but at least 72 hours ahead of time.

—ask for assistance at your layover and arrival airports as well[1].

—ask the TSA any other questions

Medications and medical equipment: The TSA limits the amount of liquids you can take on the plane, but this is not true if a liquid is medically necessary. You show these and other medical equipment to the agents at the security checkpoint and tell them that they are medically necessary[6].

Passing through the metal detector, there will be a short time that your child will have to let go of everything except their clothes: things like sound canceling headphones and tablets will have to go on the conveyor belt. Passengers have to take off belts and jackets and take laptops and liquids out of their luggage[6]. If you think this time will be difficult for your child, practice this and explain it to them before your trip.

Passengers with disabilities do not have to remove their shoes, though other passengers do[6].

You can choose for you and your child whether you would like to go through the metal detector or go to the side and be patted down, but having a strange person touching them may be scary for your child[6].

If a child is under 12, a caretaker may escort them through the metal detector[1].

Think about buying a TSA Pre✓® membership at this site: [tsa.gov/precheck](https://tsa.gov/precheck)

This pass usually involves a faster line, and with it you usually don't have to take off your shoes, belts and jackets or take out your laptops and liquids.

## FINDING YOUR GATE and WAITING

If your airport has a tramway (indoor train), please see the subway section of this guide to help you prepare.

Make sure to use the buddy system, as airports

are large and crowded. The buddy system means your child holds hands or stays with an adult all the time.

If your child has their own luggage, make sure they know they cannot leave it and walk away. This may be a good time to go to the sensory room or kids lounge, if your airport has these. If you selected specific seats online, especially if tickets were bought from a website not run by the airline, you may not get the seats you chose unless you ask for them directly from the airline. Asking the agent at the desk in front of your gate is your last chance to officially get your seating switched.

**BOARDING:** This and security checkpoint are two of the harder steps in air travel[1].

Families with special needs are almost always allowed to board early[1].

Going down the jetway (the tunnel-like bridge from the airport to the plane) may worry your child: The space will suddenly become quiet and narrow, then you may hear airplane engine noise, and you may end up waiting in line here. Children sometimes believe that the jetway itself is the airplane.



*Passenger on a plane*

## THE FLIGHT

• **Communicate:** You may want to tell the staff on the airplane and the passengers sitting near you about your child. Some parents will put a note with a piece of candy on each chair nearby them.

• **The Kit:** The kit you make before your trip will help now. Help your child to save some treats and games so that they don't run out and get bored.

• **Moving Around:** People have to stay in



their seats when the lights in the ceiling shaped like a seatbelts are lit up. When lights aren't lit, your child can move around the plane as much as they want. If your flight is more than an hour and a half, you'll probably be able to move around most of the time you're flying. You will know best whether your child needs someone going with them or not. Moving around the plane is not easy even when you are allowed to: the narrow aisles mean that you have to squeeze by other passengers, and if there is a meal cart in the aisle you will have to backtrack or wait at an aisle intersection for the flight attendant to push the cart by.

- **The Ticket Game:** If your child has difficulty sitting still for long periods, but you want to limit how much they get up to move around, you could try teaching them a ticket game. For example: give your child a home-made ticket or coupon, one for every half hour you're going to be on the plane. Explain to them that they can only get up for a five-minute period if they give you a ticket. Because they only have a few, they shouldn't use them up too fast. You could start teaching this game in the weeks before you leave. You could use the ticket game with other habits they have (it doesn't have to be just for walking around).

If your child simply wants to stand, the back of the plane may be a good place since no one is trying to walk through. If your plane is a large one with two main aisles, the cross aisles connecting the two aisles are also good spots where people do not walk through very often.

- **Bathrooms:** The bathrooms are small, and it is not always clear how you flush, how you turn on the faucet, and where the trash should be put. You might not be in the bathroom while your child uses it, so this would be a good topic to talk about beforehand. You may want to point out how to do everything while the door is open, and you are standing in the aisle. Very importantly, many kinds of airplane toilets are so loud when they flush that they are painful to the ears. You may want to use the bathroom before your child to check the kind of toilet and warn your child if it is the loud kind. You may want to flush for them.

- **Air Conditioning:** The air conditioning nozzle in the ceiling above your seat will almost always be on full blast when you sit down. This air is very dry and can make you feel cold. Many people do not know that this air can be turned off by twisting the nozzle.

**PROBLEMS** — Dealing with delays, stress, or tantrums: When you are making your plan, remember that delays, stress, or tantrums might happen. Make sure your child's kit contains things that can keep them occupied during long waits, and anything that can help

tantrums cool down.

**In the airport:** Always be looking for time-out areas. Some airports have a sensory room or a kids lounge. In many airport situations you can find an unused departure gate waiting area.

**On the plane:** You can use the bathroom for privacy. Remember that, as long as the seatbelt sign is off, you and your child can move around as much as you want. The back of the plane and cross lanes that connect the aisles are the best spots if you need to be out of your chairs and staying in one place.



*Tray of food served on an plane*



*Passengers boarding an airplane*



*Toilet on an airplane*

[1]: Skillicorn, K. (2013). A review of airport accessibility programs for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders: *Recommendations for the development of a program at Portland International Airport*. (Doctoral dissertation). Pacific University, Oregon.

[2]: Sedgely, D., Pritchard, A., Morgan, N., & Hanna, P. (2017). Tourism and autism: Journeys of mixed emotions. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 66, 14-25.

[3]: Delta.com

[4]: United.com

[5]: FlyPittsburgh.com

[6]: TSA.gov