

Traveling with Children with Special Needs



By Joleen Fernald

For most families, summertime means relaxing by the pool, days at the beach, or completing the “to-do list” that has been sitting around since the winter. Many families also use the warm summer weather and school break for traveling. This brings about excitement, enthusiasm and dreams of where and how to spend time away with family and friends. However, for those families who have children with special needs, summertime can also be very stressful, especially when considering traveling.



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Traveling with children who have special needs requires planning and although you know your child best, it can be extremely helpful to enlist the support of a travel planner to assist with expertise about your specific location. Regardless of the needs of your child, there are some basic steps to follow when traveling.

The first step in planning is to figure out *where* to go on your vacation. Often, I think this step should happen prior to your budget. Determine whether you want a theme park experience such as *Walt Disney World®* Resort, a national park, a cruise, or perhaps a more beach-like vacation is what you are seeking. Don't assume because your child has a particular need, he wouldn't enjoy the experience of which you are dreaming. Most vacation spots are required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and have wonderful programs and accommodations to meet the needs of all visitors to their property. Envision having the perfect family vacation and then take the steps to make it happen.

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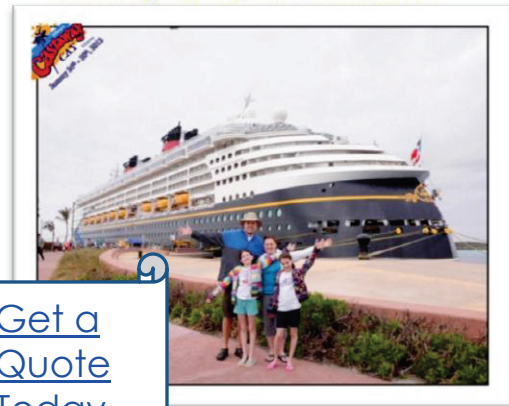
Next, decide *when* you'd like to travel. This may be dependent on getting time off work or if your child is exceptionally sensitive to the heat. Also, Extended School Year (ESY) programs for children with special needs frequently meet for five or six weeks in the middle of summer break,

so you wouldn't want your child to miss those classes. Check with your travel agent on specials that might be available for travel in early summer or promotions like Disney's Free Dining toward the end of the summer months into the fall.

Once you've narrowed down a time to travel and where you'd like to visit, the rest of the planning becomes easier. I recommend thinking about a typical day at home and considering the necessities to make your child's day run smoothly. This will help in all facets of vacationing especially when packing. Make a list of “must not forgets” and set aside a laundry basket or large bag to begin filling as you remember items. For most children, it's important to have some type of hat, cooling system (i.e. small fan, ice packs, cold washcloths in plastic bags), sunscreen, and sunglasses. Some children with special needs won't tolerate any of these items, so alternatives need to be made for their protection. Depending on your location,



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specific items will need to be packed. For example, when cruising and often for Disney vacations, I recommend a shoe organizer with pockets that hang over a door. This saves space and is a convenient storage center for medications and smaller items that can clutter up a counter.

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When flying, consider whether a non-stop flight is better than a flight with a layover. Some kids need to get up and move around. A six hour flight across the country with your child sprinting up and down the aisle may not be what you had in mind. Make sure to pack plenty of snacks in the carry-on luggage as well as entertainment (iPad, laptop, gaming systems) and first aid items (Band-Aids, antiseptic creams, and ear plugs). I also recommend gallon-size ziplock bags for any motion sickness. If you haven't flown in a while consult your travel agent for up to date flying guidelines. By the way, you don't pay any fees for using your travel planner. The services are free and we all love free things!

Planning out each day of your vacation doesn't need to feel as though you've enlisted in the military. It's possible to have a general

itinerary, keeping your child in mind, while still having enough flexibility to stop and smell the roses if the opportunity arises. Regardless of where you've decided to visit, keeping a sleep routine will be important. Wake up when you'd normally get out of bed and get extra rest in the middle of the day. You don't want your child to be the one having the meltdown at two o'clock in the afternoon because he's overtired. Enjoy some down time in the middle of the day or head to your hotel in the early afternoon for swimming in the pool and rest. Make sure you know the lay of the land, so to speak. Ask where shady spots are away from noisy and over stimulating areas. This may not be a challenge in a national forest, but if you choose Disney for your vacation, you'd better have a backup plan for down time.

You may be saying to yourself that these suggestions seem to be good recommendations for all families traveling with children and you are correct. Most suggestions for kids with special needs are also good for all children. Know this is not an exhaustive list of advice, but when you work with a good travel planner who is knowledgeable about your vacation destination, you'll get specific support geared just for you and your family! Now, go work less and vacation more!



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In addition to being a pediatric speech language pathologist, Joleen Fernald enjoys being a travel planner for Key to the World Travel where she specializes in Disney vacations including Disneyland® Resort, Walt Disney World® Resort, Disney Cruise Line, Adventures by Disney®, and Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa. [Click Here](#) to learn more about Disney vacations and receive a free gift when booking your trip.