



Why Not to Lick the Airport Water Fountain and Other Survival Tips: Q&A with a Mom and Behavior Analyst on Safe Travel with Neurodiverse Kids

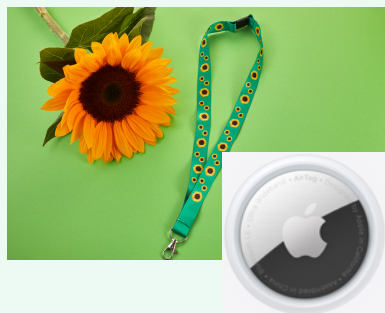
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Lauren Tucker is an associate professor at Southern Connecticut State University and the mother of a neurodiverse daughter. Kristy Hynes is an assistant professor at Southern Connecticut State University and a board-certified behavior analyst. In this article they answer questions about traveling safely with neurodiverse children.

Q: What do you suggest to support travel for sensory needs *and* safety?

Lauren:



My daughter is six and gloriously neurospicy. She's smart, curious, distractible, and 100 percent committed to exploring the world, whether or not I'm with her. We've done a lot of trial and error, and I swear by a few go-to measures.

- I give my daughter temporary tattoos with my cell number. As an added bonus, she thinks they're cool now, not just functional.
- I have my daughter use a sunflower lanyard to subtly signal "invisible disability" to airport staff. Of course, this only works when staff are actually trained, an area that needs improvement. On one recent trip, an airport staff member pointed out the "Sunflower" security lane. This experience was borderline life-changing. All the agents went slow, explained the process, and even joked with my girls.
- I also include an Apple AirTag on the lanyard. We tried pinning it on a shirt or on a shoe, but she did not like the sensory feedback. Having it on the lanyard helps when she decides to join other families to have fun.

Kristy:

I agree with much of what Lauren has said. She is already doing so many great things. Combining safety supports with opportunities for independence reflects a thoughtful and proactive approach to supporting children in unfamiliar environments. From a behavioral standpoint, the following are some suggestions on how to build on that base.



Pre-teach travel routines before the trip

Practice common travel steps like standing in line, walking through security, or wearing headphones at home first. Use video models and role-playing to help children learn what to expect before they face it in real time. This builds comfort and understanding.



Bring a sensory kit tailored to your child

Items like noise-canceling headphones, chewy necklaces or favorite fidgets can help your child stay calm and focused by reducing exposure to overwhelming sounds or sensations. Rotating items helps maintain interest and keeps the calming tools effective.



Practice what to do if you get separated

Use visual supports, such as cards with contact information, and practice simple scripts such as, "I'm lost, can you help me?" Placing these visual supports on a lanyard helps make them accessible when needed.



Use consistent reinforcement

Bring small rewards that your child enjoys, including snacks, stickers or a favorite app. Establish clear expectations by saying things like, "First we wait in line, then you get your prize." This structure makes it easier for your child to navigate tricky moments.

Q: How can caregivers deal with theme parks? They are both a sensory nightmare *and* a child's dreamland.

Lauren:

The trip to the theme park was magical, but I needed a nap and a therapist when we got home. I applied for the accommodation pass ahead of time. Even though I was quite nervous about the process of applying, I found that it was not as painful as I thought. An added bonus was the fact that we had a neurodiverse cast member share tips and tricks around the park! When my daughter had a meltdown before the Philharmonic show and didn't want to go in, we just left. It was no big deal. What could we have done better?



Kristy:

Theme parks are exciting but can also be overwhelming. Here are some ideas on how to make them more manageable.



Use a visual schedule for the day

Create a simple plan with pictures of rides, activities, snacks or rest breaks. You can use an app or print photos from the park's website. Letting your child help create the schedule promotes engagement through choice-making and increases the likelihood of successful transitions by making the routine more predictable.



Plan for break opportunities throughout the day

Theme parks can be overwhelming, so having access to a designated quiet space is essential. Many parks offer sensory-friendly break areas. Be sure to check with guest services when you arrive or call ahead to locate them. For some children, a stroller — even for older kids — can serve as a mobile break zone. Stock it with snacks, preferred items or a fan to provide a consistent and accessible space for calming and regrouping when needed.



Prepare for tricky transitions

Skipping a favorite ride or leaving a fun area can be hard. Use tools like timers, countdown visuals or preferred reinforcers to make those transitions smoother. Say things such as, “We’re leaving Dumbo now, but guess what’s next? Ice cream!”



Use safety identification

Wristbands, name tags, or ID cards with caregiver contact information can serve as important safety measures. These can be paired with communication supports, such as a help card or script, to promote independent help-seeking.

Q: Do you have any clever tips for managing sensory overload in new places like airports or hotels?



Lauren:

Great question! The first indication of overload for my kiddo is sensory. Seat belts or restraints are the number one stressor when “her bucket is empty.” Then we progress to pant waistlines, underwear, socks and shoes. Any event or space that requires specific clothing, especially in times of stress, is a no-go for us. She needs to feel safe and comfortable, especially in an unfamiliar environment.

Kristy:

New environments like hotels or airports can set the stage for big reactions. You can support your child by making the unfamiliar feel more predictable and safe.



Set up a sensory-friendly space in the hotel

Items like a favorite pillowcase, weighted blanket, lavender-scented wipes or a pop-up tent can serve as familiar cues that let children know they're in a safe and predictable space, similar to what they experience at home. These comforting items can help reduce stress and make it easier for children to stay calm and engaged in a new environment.



Use sound-blocking strategies

White noise machines, calming playlists or headphones can help block out overwhelming sounds. These tools are especially helpful during transitions like check-in or in loud lobbies.



Turn exploring into a game

Rather than jumping straight into unfamiliar experiences, you can help your child get comfortable by turning exploration into a playful activity. Say things like, "Let's find five cool things in the room!" This approach uses positive reinforcement and choice to encourage interaction with the environment, thus helping children feel more confident and increasing the likelihood that they'll engage with new surroundings.



Keep routines consistent

Bring parts of your bedtime or morning routine from home. Use the same storybook, same pajamas, and same song while brushing teeth. Consistent routines help your child know what to expect, which can increase cooperation and reduce the likelihood of challenging behavior in new or unfamiliar settings.

Q: Do you have any final words for fellow parents who are nervous about traveling with their neurodiverse kiddos?



Lauren:

You're not alone! If no one has told you lately, you're doing a great job. Even if you're sweating through your shirt while trying to explain TSA to your six-year-old who wants to know why security doesn't use sparkles, why she can't pet the police dog and why not to lick the water fountain.

Kristy:

Remember that the goal isn't a perfect trip: it's a safe, supported and positive experience that allows your child to participate meaningfully. Focus on progress. If your child remained with you in a busy parking lot or used a strategy they learned to ask for a break, recognize those things as meaningful behavioral gains.

Every trip offers opportunities to teach new skills, generalize learned behaviors to new environments and create shared experiences. With thoughtful planning and consistent supports, travel can be not just manageable but truly enriching.



Lauren and Kristy:

If you've got travel tips of your own or want more information on neurodiverse-friendly destinations, please let us know. We're here for the laughs, the meltdowns and the wins.



Bios

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