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### Special Needs



#### Vacationing With Children With Special Needs

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### Savvy Advice For Vacationing With Children With Special Needs



By Dr. Scott L. Barkin

Vacationing with a child with special needs requires extra special planning. Sights, sounds and experiences that would delight other children might overwhelm a child with special needs. The keys to having a happy vacation with your niece or nephew with a developmental disability are planning and preparation. An auntie may be very present in a child's life, however, she may not always know every little detail in a child's everyday care.

Start your vacation planning by speaking with the child's parents to discuss past trips, travel experiences and the child's day-to-day needs. The discussion will help to guide you in selecting the destinations and travel arrangements that would best suit your niece or nephew. Consider too, what your needs and goals are, how much you can spend and then identify information resources to help you plan.

Set realistic goals for the vacation. If other children will be along on the trip, consider how you will manage expectations and make the trip fun for all. Whether it's a theme park vacation or a trip to visit relatives map out what you hope you and the children will gain from the experience.

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Once you've decided on a destination, the next step is to determine the environments your trip will include such as a car ride or commercial travel (train, bus or airplane), hotel or resort, urban or rural destinations. Discuss the options with the parents, you might find out that the child does better with one environment over the other. Then consider the following elements: accessibility and necessary accommodations, crowds, delays/lines, intrinsic stimuli associated with environments (sights, sounds, smells, etc.) and availability of medical attention. Each of these elements should be considered for each of the environments you are likely to find yourself in with your niece or nephew.

Evaluate all of your travel options, including mode of transportation, size of travel hub (regional airport versus national) and peak times/seasons of travel. Although plane travel may present as the fastest mode of transportation, you may need to accommodate unexpected delays in departure or arrival, a relatively confined area and limited availability of emergency care. Road travel may offer greater flexibility and opportunity should plans need to be modified.

Identify the accommodations that are necessary for your travelers. Call ahead to hotels, theme parks, museums, restaurants and other planned stops to make sure the location has the essentials you need. Many of the most popular family resort destinations have wonderful accommodations for families with special needs, however, the availability can be limited. Remember that websites and guide books may not be 100 percent accurate.

Many of the issues we adults deal with day-to-day, such as inclement weather or menu limitations can ruin a trip for a child with special needs. Scope out options, make smart choices and make certain you know in advance about issues such as allergies and food preferences, medication and the child's individual schedule.

Consider the child's normal routine and try to work within the basic structure of their day. Major changes in bed times, meals or nap times can really throw off a child. Encourage your niece or nephew to bring along favorite objects or apparel such as a blanket, stuffed animal, toy, PJs or a favorite food that will comfort the child. Plan for the possibility of transportation delays by bringing along books, toys or a portable MP3 or DVD player to help you all to pass the time peacefully. Enable the child to phone home and speak with a parent regularly.

Identify location and directions for contacting or visiting emergency care. Take along a first aid kit.

Lastly, be flexible and open to changes in the itinerary you create. Things might not always go the way you plan. Talk with your niece or nephew about different options prior to the trip in case one opportunity becomes unavailable. Include him or her in the planning process in any way possible. Discuss what they wish for the trip. Maybe they don't want to go on all the rides at Disney World, maybe they just want to spend some quality time with their favorite auntie!

*Scott L. Barkin, Ph.D., is Executive Director of Block Institute, a Brooklyn, New York educational facility dedicated to serving the needs of children and adults with disabilities.*