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Special Vacation Advice for Families with Special Needs Children

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The excitement of going on a family vacation can be matched only by the stress parents experience as they prepare for the excursion. Parents of children with disabilities have special considerations to keep in mind, including the mode of transportation, the accessibility of accommodations, whether the activities will be appropriate for all members of the family and even special dietary needs.

Planning is key to assuring a fun time will be had by all. You might begin by speaking with others who may be able to share valuable experiences. Parents should consider the purpose of the trip so that expectations can be managed. Is the trip meant as a visit with family and/or friends, an exploration of someplace new, a visit to a familiar vacation destination, or a promise of rest and relaxation? Keep the goals realistic and attainable. With a goal in mind, consider which strategies and planning will likely lead to success.

Review each of the environments the trip will include; car ride or commercial travel (train, bus, airplane), hotel/resort, restaurants, urban or rural destinations. Then consider the following elements and how you will manage them when the time comes: accessibility and necessary accommodations, crowds, delays/lines, intrinsic stimuli associated with environments (sights, sounds, smells, etc...), and availability of medical attention.

Families should evaluate all of their travel options, including the preferred mode of transportation, the size of travel hub – for example a small regional airport versus an international airport -- and whether the family will be traveling at peak times, days or seasons. The following web site can be a useful resource for family travel planning: <http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/specialneeds/index.shtm>. Include in your planning some tactics to employ if long waits occur, such as portable DVD players, MP3 players, favorite toys, travel games and snacks.

Examine which accommodations are essential to the family's travel as well as those that might contribute to a more successful trip. It's essential to call ahead to confirm that the desired and identified accommodations are available for you on your vacation dates. Many of the most popular family resort destinations have wonderful accommodations for families with special needs, however, availability can be limited.

Upon arrival, explore the surroundings and determine where quieter areas can be found. These can provide a peaceful respite for children and parents, alike.

For families whose children have limited food preferences, cater to them. A vacation may not be the time to experiment with new foods in front of an audience.

Establish a supervision schedule in advance and share responsibilities with other adults in your group, if possible. If you don't have a spouse who can pitch in, consider bringing along a friend, relative, therapist or respite worker.

Remember to incorporate the crucial objects, schedule, routine, clothes or other items that make a difference to your child. This can help reduce stress created by unfamiliar places and experiences.

Consider everything you have learned from past experiences and reflect on what went well and what did not. Try to identify why some events went poorly and identify strategies in advance of the trip that now that might produce a positive outcome.

Now take these lists of routines, personal items, preferences, foods and other considerations and provide them to the key people you will be sharing the holiday with, so that they have a set of expectations for your visit. This can significantly cut down on the questioning glances and the thoughts that you are being judged.

Before departure, compile a "to-go-packet" of information so that if a last minute opportunity becomes available you are prepared with a list of questions, items to pack, information that should be brought on a trip... the essentials.

Following the trip, make notes of what went well and what did not and consider why. This will help organize your thoughts and hopefully make your next vacation even simpler to plan and more enjoyable for everyone!

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