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Dr. Scott Barkin, executive director of the Brooklyn-based Block Institute, offers travel advice for families with a child who has special needs.



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. Parents should consider the purpose of the trip so that expectations can

be managed: Is it a visit with family or friends, or an exploration of somewhere new? Keep the goals realistic and attainable.

Take into account all you know from your past experiences, and reflect on what went well and what did not. Try to identify why some things went poorly, and come up with strategies in advance of the trip that might produce a better outcome this time around.

Once you've decided on a destination, review all the environments the trip will include: car ride or commercial travel (train, bus, airplane); hotel/resort; restaurants; urban or rural stop-offs. Each will be vital to planning your trip. 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. Planes may offer a quicker trip, but they do not allow much flexibility. Though it may take longer to arrive at your destination, a car ride allows you to stop as needed. If you do decide to travel by plane, research the TSA website, and call the airline ahead of time to gather information about traveling with disabled travelers, as well as the airport to ask where to go upon arrival.

Include in your planning some tactics to employ if long waits occur, or if you will be in a car or bus for long periods of time, such as portable DVD players, MP3 players, favorite toys, travel games and snacks.

Details, Details

As tedious as it may seem, make a list of the following possibilities, along with specific ways you will manage them: accessibility, crowds, delays and lines, intrinsic stimuli associated with environments (sights, sounds, smells, etc.), and availability of medical attention. For children with special needs, any or all of these factors could have a significant impact on the vacation.

It's essential to call ahead to confirm that your desired accommodations are available on your vacation dates. Many of the most popular family resort destinations have wonderful accommodations for families with special needs, but availability can be limited. It's also wise to phone ahead to inform the resort or hotel where you will be staying about a child's food preferences so that they can be arranged in advance. Upon arrival, explore the surroundings to determine where quieter areas can be found. These can provide a peaceful respite for children and parents alike

Establish a supervision schedule, sharing 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, clothes or other items that make a difference to your child, and try to maintain a schedule that is similar to the routine the child knows. Consistency helps help reduce stress that can result from unfamiliar places and experiences.

Schedules and lists of preferences should be shared with others in your travel party. Help others to be prepared by speaking with travel agents or staff at your destination to help them understand the parameters of your travel with a child who has a disability. Confirm that physical needs can be met. And remember that your special needs child has a particular need for acceptance and patience.

Unfortunately, no matter how many steps are taken to prevent uninvited behavior and judgment from others, there will simply be some who do not understand. Don't assume that others realize your family member has a disability; ignorance often leads us to draw the wrong conclusion. When the public doesn't act at its best, address rude behavior (such as staring) by inviting questions. Every day we have the opportunity to educate the public, and this education will help you or another at some point in the future.

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!