

Preparing Your Special Needs Child for a Disney Trip - Part 1: A Walt Disney World Planning Article

by Lauren Cataldi-May, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Taking a child with special needs to Disney World usually brings anxiety and stress to parents before the trip even begins.

How will they travel? How will they react to rides? What will they eat? These are all questions I always worry about before our annual trip to Disney World with my special needs child. All children with special needs thrive on previewing new and different things. When you preview anything for a child with special needs, you help relieve some of the stress of the unknown for them. There are a few things I always do before I leave on our trip to make the trip successful.

One of the most helpful tools I have found for helping my child preview before our trip is [YouTube](#). We watch videos of rides a couple of weeks before our trip begins. You can find videos of the stage shows, musicals, fireworks, and rides. My son loves fast rides, so we watch ride videos of Expedition Everest, Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, Splash Mountain, Space Mountain, and Test Track, just to name a few. Many of the videos found on YouTube have the queue as well as the ride itself. Previewing what the wait will look like is also helpful, as many children with special needs have a difficult time with waiting to get on a ride.

□ Another great preview site is [wdwvirtualvisit.com](#). You can watch a ride from the Ticket and Transportation Center to Epcot, walk around Epcot, and go on some rides in the various parks. Being able to preview what it looks like inside the parks is a helpful tool for special needs children. They can become very overwhelmed by the music inside the parks and all of the noise made inside the parks. When previewing the walks around the parks, ask your child what they notice. When you are at the parks, make it a point to review what you noticed in the videos. This will help your child make the connections from previewing the videos and help with the transitions while in the parks.

□ Using social stories can also help children with special needs preview what to expect. A social story details what will happen and how the child should react. For example, you could make a social story about traveling on the bus at Disney World. You could put a picture of the bus, how to sit on the bus, how to wait patiently on the bus, and how to exit the bus. You can make one through power point and then show it on your computer or print it out. Having the social story with you at the place

will also help your child to cope during the moment.

Special needs children can often have specific food allergies, special diets, or can be picky eaters. Make sure you know where your child can eat before you go to the quick service places and the sit down restaurants. There are a couple of resources to help with the menu planning. AllEars.net has all of the menus and some pictures of the food. You can sit down with your child and ask them where they would like to eat. This is particularly helpful if you need to make your dining reservations at the 180 day mark. Other helpful places to look for menus are the [Disney Food Blog](http://DisneyFoodBlog.com) and [Disney's dining reservation site](http://DisneyDiningReservation.com).

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□When planning a trip, I also remember to pack toys, food items, and other positive reinforcers that may be helpful to have for my child, especially when transitioning to different activities. You can involve your child and ask them what toys or reinforcers they would like to bring. My son, who has autism, has sensory issues with chewing on toys. I pack sensory chewable toys so that he can have something to chew on when he becomes frustrated or needs sensory input time. Packing items that help with transitions from rides and items that help with transitions leaving the parks are a must. My son has a difficult time transitioning off of rides, so I remember to pack gummy bears to help with those transitions.

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□If you are flying, the airlines are great at accommodating children with special needs. Before we flew with my son the first time, I contacted my local airport who put me in touch with my specific airline. This airline walked us through security so my son would not have to wait in line, let us preview a plane before he flew, and let us pre-board so my son could choose where he wanted to sit. This took a ton of anxiety off of my husband and I who were not sure how my son would react to flying.

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□Taking a trip to Walt Disney World can cause anxiety. Taking a trip with your special needs child can cause tremendous anxiety. Doing some of these strategies with your child will help alleviate your stress, as well as your child's stress. Enjoy your trip and remember to take as many photos as you can - so you can preview those photos for your next trip!

About The Author: Lauren teaches Kindergarten Music in Delaware and is also a church organist and handbell director for her home church. She enjoys visiting Disney World with her husband, Jeff, and two boys, Jacob (7) and William (2). In her spare time, Lauren enjoys helping to raise money for Give Kids the World through the charity Delaware Magical Wishes Association. See more at:

<http://www.passporter.com/articles/disney-diet-21-day-fix.php>

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