

Preparing Your Special Needs Child for a Disney Trip - Part 2: Using Pictures: A Walt Disney World Planning Article

by Lauren Cataldi-May, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Going to Walt Disney World with a child can be a challenge at times.

Taking a child with special needs to Walt Disney World is even more challenging. As a mother of a child with special needs and an educator with a Master's Degree in Special Education, I have come to rely on the picture schedules to help me navigate my daily life at school, with my son, and especially at Walt Disney World.

For those of you unfamiliar with picture schedules or charts, they are pictures describing the daily events for your child to help them navigate through the day. Children with autism find picture schedules helpful to transition from activity to activity and to make choices throughout the day. These pictures can be used to do a daily schedule, give your child a choice of activities, or to be their voice if your child is non-verbal.

□ It can be a bit daunting to get pictures together for a trip. It took me a couple of hours to figure out what exactly I needed for our recent trip. So here are some categories I decided to find pictures for: transportation options, food options, ride options, and things to do at the hotel. I made a Word document that included rides my son would enjoy, food choices I knew he would eat, the parks we would be visiting, and our transportation options (bus, monorail, ferry, and boat). Once I had the pictures together, I printed them (in color), and had them laminated. Add velcro to the back to help your child make choices on their charts. You can make a chart that is vertical to show the events of the entire day. You can also do a "First/Then Chart" if your child needs smaller steps throughout the day. Put the first ride on the "First" portion and then the next ride under the "Then" section. This chart is particularly helpful if your child has difficulty transitioning from ride to ride, like my son does.

□ My best advice for parents with special needs is to make sure you try to follow your normal daily routine on vacation as much as possible. For example, my son eats breakfast at home, so we eat as a family in our room before we head to the parks.

Before we leave for the parks, I make sure I have the picture symbols and my chart to put the symbols on. I will make sure I tell him, "We are going to ride the bus now," and show him a picture of the bus. You can

also use the "First/Then" chart to say bus under first and the specific park under the "then" column.

□ Using picture symbols is also useful when it comes time to eating inside the parks. Disney does a great job putting pictures on their menus, but children with special needs often are not able to look when you point to an object. My son is used to a specific symbol for a hot dog or grilled cheese sandwich. If I try to show him the picture Disney uses on their menu board, he will say no. I know he will eat the item, but the picture is not the same. Having the same picture we use at home helps him to choose a food item.

□ Another useful tool I use when I take my son to the park is a "Wait" card. We all know that waiting in lines is difficult for children. It is especially difficult for those children with special needs. I cannot explain to my son why we have to wait for a ride - he does not understand. Using the "wait" card, which he uses at home with his therapists and when we go places, helps to make waiting in lines a less painful experience for us and the guests around us. Just make sure you have at least a couple of the wait cards with you. We had the unfortunate experience of losing our only "Wait" card on a recent trip. Luckily, Staples was only a car ride away and my son's therapist was able to email them a file with the card.

□ A final piece of advice I have is to make sure you have the pictures ready when you are about to leave the park. Again, transitioning for kids with special needs is difficult. I always make sure I have a picture of our mode of transportation under the "first" column and then a preferred activity under the "then" column. For example, I will put the bus under the "first" column and then a picture of a pool under the "then" column. I know I can get my son to leave a park as long as he can go swimming when we get back to the hotel.

□ Picture schedules and charts can be time consuming to set up, but they are worth the effort. Having a system set in place for your child to be successful is less stressful on your child and on your family. The schedules and charts can make your Disney vacation enjoyable for everyone.

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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