

# Disney World and Down Syndrome - A Winning Combination: Walt Disney World with Special Needs

by Phyllis Tate, PassPorter Guest Contributor

For our family, Down Syndrome and Walt Disney World are a winning combination.

The days spent at the Walt Disney World Resort have been magical for Andrew, the youngest of our four children, who has Down Syndrome. The preparations for upcoming trips and the reminiscing upon returning home have also brought much joy and opportunity for learning. From his first trip as a 6-year-old small enough for a stroller to our last trip with a 15-year-old who decided a wheelchair might not be such a bad idea after all, we've had some interesting experiences.

Our first trip with Andrew in 2003 didn't hold any major "special needs" challenges. Although Andrew was 6, it wasn't much different than having a typical preschool-age child. He was happy to be in the stroller, napped when he needed to, was thrilled by the characters, and was small enough to be carried as we waited in line for attractions. After the trip, he loved watching the videos and looking through the pictures. So a year and-a-half later we decided to go back for his 8th birthday.

□ This time around, he had expectations of where we were going. He was excited to be returning to Walt Disney World! But would he understand that the first two days were for traveling? We knew we needed to prepare him. We created a book entitled "Andrew's Trip to Disney World." We had a page for each day showing what we would be doing. The first day was "Drive to Aunt Teresa's house," with a drawing of a minivan and a house. The second day was "Drive to the hotel," again with a drawing of a minivan and a hotel. Then we made a separate page for each day in the park, using photos from old brochures. We were always working on calendar skills, so we put the day and date on each page, especially focusing on his birthday.

□ While still a wonderful experience, this second trip had a few challenges. We had moved three months before, and during the move Andrew had developed an aversion to sitting in restaurant chairs. So at every meal on that trip, Andrew sat in my lap. We have photos at Cinderella's Royal Table and Liberty Tree Tavern that remind me how tiring that was! But I wasn't going to let that prevent us from having fun and I knew there was no reason to fight it, so we just carried on. Thankfully he outgrew that phase! This time around, Andrew was

also a little wary of characters and not always happy about having his picture taken. We have many photos of him with his eyes closed, which was his way of not cooperating. He still pulls that one on us sometimes but we've learned to warn the photographers and tell them not to be concerned.

In 2008, we visited the Orlando area with extended family, this time spending only one day at the Magic Kingdom. It was late March and rather crowded. By this time, we had learned about the Guest Assistance Card, which was a huge blessing. Andrew was now 11 years old and much too big to be carried. While generally a well behaved and happy child, he could sometimes become very stubborn and difficult to handle. My biggest fear was that he would get tired of standing in line and just sit down. If he did that, it might take a really long time to convince him to get up. The Guest Assistance Card allowed us to use an alternate entrance on the rides that had that option.

□ In December 2010 we spent our longest time at Walt Disney World. We had five days in the parks in very cold weather. On day three of that trip Andrew was really tired. Having very low muscle tone causes him to tire more easily than typical children and having pronated arches causes his feet to hurt. We were visiting Animal Kingdom and he wanted to sit down at every possible chance. We tried our best to convince him to ride in a wheelchair, but he insisted that he wanted a stroller. We had him try to sit in one to see that he simply wouldn't fit anymore, but he still refused a wheelchair. We ended up leaving Animal Kingdom and later going to the Magic Kingdom where his energy returned and we were able to enjoy the rest of the day.

□ In August of 2011 Disney released a Free Dining special that I couldn't resist, so we booked another five-day trip for the week after Thanksgiving. Andrew was very excited and looking forward to the trip. To help him understand just how long it was until the trip, I bought a 100 chart from the school supply store and started a countdown. Every morning at breakfast we stamped a Mickey face on the chart, starting with 100 and counting down to one. I also kept an abacus in the kitchen and moved a bead over each day. If I ever forgot, Andrew was quick to remind me!

□ On this trip, by day three or four, Andrew was again very tired and said that his feet hurt. This time he was willing to get in a wheelchair. He was able to enjoy the rest of the day and by the time we left the park he stood up and commented that his feet no longer hurt.

□ Walt Disney World is one of Andrew's favorite topics of conversation. We have photo albums from each trip and any time a visitor comes over,

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Andrew wants to show them the photos. He tells them about the characters and the rides, describing Big Thunder Mountain Railroad as the ride that goes up and down and side to side. The magic of Disney is a language everyone can understand!

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□Some of my happiest memories are of Andrew riding The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh. Watching a video of that from one of our earlier trips brings a smile to my face. I doubt anyone has had more fun on that ride than Andrew. For someone who has carried around a toy Tigger for many years, what could be better! As many families of special needs children have found, Walt Disney World is a place where our kids can be "normal." Sure, we have our challenges, but with the incredible hospitality of the Disney Cast Members, our kids shine.

*About The Author: Phyllis has spent the past 21 years homeschooling her four children. Now that three of them have graduated, she has a little extra spare time and enjoys spending it planning the next trip to Walt Disney World. In January, 2013, she'll again be at the most magical place on earth with all four children, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, and two precious grandsons making their first visit!*

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