

Air Travel Checklist for a Child with Autism

Use this checklist to plan, pack, and navigate the airport and flight with confidence.

- Traveler name(s): _____
- Flight(s): _____ Date: _____ Confirmation #: _____
- Airline: _____ Departure Airport: _____ Arrival Airport: _____
- Seat(s): _____ Gate: _____ Boarding Time: _____ Departure Time: _____
- Special Services Notes (TSA Cares, preboarding, wheelchair, etc.):

Before You Book (1–2 weeks+ out)

- Research nonstop or shorter flights when possible; target usual calm/alert times of day.
- Check aircraft seating map for ideal seats (bulkhead/window, close to restroom, avoid last row if noise triggers).
- Review airline disability policies and assistance options (preboarding, seating, medical cooler, etc.).
- Consider purchasing travel insurance in case plans need to change.
- If helpful, plan a practice airport visit or use virtual tours of your airport and the aircraft type.

Documentation & Services

- Contact TSA Cares (855-787-2227) 72+ hours before travel to request screening assistance.
- Ask airline for preboarding and seating accommodations; note confirmation on reservation.
- If needed, request a letter from a clinician summarizing diagnosis/needs (optional).
- Print or download copies of: tickets, IDs, accommodations emails, medical/device letters, prescriptions.
- Pack communication cards, social stories, or a short 'about me' card to share with staff if desired.

Packing: Essentials

- IDs, tickets/boarding passes, payment cards, insurance cards, emergency contacts.
- Headphones/ear defenders; preferred sensory tools (chewy, fidget, weighted lap pad if allowed).
- Tablet/phone, chargers, power bank, downloaded videos/apps (offline).
- Snacks and comfort foods (consider security rules: solids OK; liquids/gels follow TSA rules).
- Empty water bottle to fill after security; or plan to purchase water airside.
- Medications in original containers; daily doses in carry-on (never checked).
- Medical/feeding supplies (syringes, EpiPen, inhaler, glucose supplies, formula); label and keep accessible.
- Change of clothes for child (and light top for caregiver); wet wipes; zipper bags for soiled items.
- Small blanket or hoodie; familiar comfort item (stuffed toy, photo, small book).
- Portable visual schedule, first-then board, or token board; dry-erase marker and small board.

Preparing Your Child

- [] Create a simple social story with photos of your airport/plane and the steps of travel.
- [] Practice wearing headphones/ear defenders and keeping them on for longer periods.
- [] Rehearse keeping shoes on/off for security (as applicable) and walking through the scanner.
- [] Preview expected wait times, lines, and body-feel changes (ear popping, seat belt).
- [] Agree on a calm-down plan and a cue word to request a break.

Day-Before Checklist

- [] Check in online; confirm seats and accommodations (preboarding, special meals, etc.).
- [] Pack carry-on with essentials in top pockets; place meds and documents in one grab pouch.
- [] Download entertainment, maps, and airline app; charge devices and power bank.
- [] Lay out travel outfits (layers, slip-on shoes, minimal metal to ease screening).
- [] Confirm ride/parking; review terminal, gate, and expected security checkpoint.
- [] Set alarms and backup alarms; print boarding passes if helpful.

Getting to the Airport

- [] Aim to arrive 2–2.5 hours early (domestic) or 3+ hours (international); buffer for breaks.
- [] Use accessible drop-off or parking; bring a lightweight stroller if it helps with transitions.
- [] Identify quiet spaces at your airport (sensory room, family restroom, chapel, unused gates).

Check-In & Security

- [] Tell airline staff briefly: 'We're traveling with a child with autism; preboarding noted on our reservation.'
- [] At security, inform officers of sensory needs and any medical/feeding supplies; request assistance if needed.
- [] Use TSA Cares or passenger support specialist when available; ask for alternative screening if appropriate.
- [] Keep liquids/medically necessary items together for quick inspection; know that greater-than-3.4oz is allowed for medical/feeding needs (declare them).
- [] Reinforce first-then expectations (e.g., 'First security, then snack/tablet at the gate').

At the Gate

- [] Locate gate, restroom, and nearest quiet area; consider brief movement breaks.
- [] Preboard to settle early or board later to reduce wait time—choose what works best for your child.
- [] Prepare seat setup bag (wipes, fidget, headphones, snack, tablet) for quick access.

Boarding & Takeoff

- [] Use visual schedule for steps: find seat → seat belt → headphones → activity.

- Plan ear pressure support: sipping water, chewing snack, yawning, or using earplanes (if approved).
- Introduce the cabin environment gradually (lights, sounds, seatbelt sign) and set simple rules.

In-Flight

- Offer predictable sequence of activities; use timers if helpful (e.g., 10–15 minute rotations).
- Provide snacks and hydration at intervals; watch for nausea or sensory overload.
- Use movement breaks within seatbelt rules; try seated stretches or brief aisle walks when allowed.
- Use calm-down tools (weighted lap pad, deep pressure with permission, breathing prompts).
- If behaviors escalate, use your plan: reduce demands, lower stimuli (hoodie/hat), switch to comfort media.

Arrival

- Stay seated until aisle clears if crowds are stressful, or deplane early if permitted.
- Regroup at a quiet spot; offer snack/hydration and restroom break.
- Confirm baggage carousel and ground transport plan; keep ID and essentials accessible.

Contingencies & Safety

- Have a recent photo of your child and a contact card/bracelet with your phone number.
- Dress in bright or matching colors for easy visual tracking.
- Use a tether, stroller, or hand strap if elopement is a risk and your child tolerates it.
- Pack basic first-aid: bandages, motion-sickness relief, fever reducer, any regular rescue meds.

Optional Nice-to-Haves

- Sunflower lanyard (hidden disability) if offered at your airport.
- Small surprises (new sticker book, small puzzle) to introduce gradually.
- Seat covers or sanitizing wipes if that eases sensory concerns.
- Portable white-noise app or fan (if allowed) for hotel/overnight.

Post-Trip Notes (for next time)

- What worked well: _____
- What we'd change next time: _____
- New triggers or supports discovered: _____

Quick Reference & Tips

- [] TSA Cares: Call 855-787-2227 at least 72 hours before travel for assistance through security.
- [] Medically necessary liquids/foods: You may carry more than 3.4 oz. Inform officers and separate for inspection.
- [] Electronics & headphones: Download media offline; consider volume-limiting headphones if useful.
- [] Preboarding: Most airlines allow preboarding for disabilities—ask at the gate and note in reservation.
- [] Quiet spaces: Many airports have sensory rooms or family rooms—check your airport map in advance.