"Take to the friendly skies." I don't remember whose tagline that was, but "friendly skies" could be up for debate by many families who have children with autism. Our kids might think airports have 'strange' and new rules, and airplanes are restrictive by nature. As with most of our children's experiences, preparation plays a large role in the success of your flight.

**Picture and read this**

If you can, show your child pictures or video of the airport, airplane, and your destination. They may be especially important if you are not able to make a practice run. You can find general pictures of airport security by googling "airport security pictures". Social stories are another good preparation tool. Kansas Autism Spectrum Disorders offers a social story on The Airport at www.kansasasd.com/KSASD/Social_Narratives_Page_1_files/Airports.pdf. You could also ask your child's teacher or therapist to help draft one for you.

**I swear, my child is not a terrorist**

The anticipation of not knowing a procedure, or what to expect next can spike a child's anxiety. Prepare your child for the security process at the airport. Help her understand that she will have to relinquish her shoes and favorite IPod (or other electronic device) but that she will get them back. And ease fears ahead of time that the pass-through metal detector will not shock or provide any harm. Go over key words that may not be used in airports or on planes — bomb, gun, terrorist, etc. (Unless of course that will only prompt the use of those words.) If you are flying out of BWI and worry that your child might blurt out something that could get him detained, or if you have other concerns, contact BWI's TSA Customer Service Manager. Visit our provider database at www.pathfindersforautism.org/ProviderSearch.aspx and select provider type Miscellaneous Services and Products and then choose Vacation for the contact information of these airlines' BWI Customer Service Managers.

**Do a practice run at the airport**

You may want to consider scheduling a practice run at the airport so that the day you fly the airport procedures won't be a new experience. I did a practice run for my son with Southwest Airlines at BWI. Diane, the Southwest representative, met us at the ticket counter. We were issued gate passes so that she could take us through security and then we headed down to the terminal. She let us board a plane and then showed my kids the baggage claim area, all while answering their many questions. It was a great experience and now my son won't have that anxiety of the unknown when he enters the airport and walks through the security process.

Along with Southwest, the other airlines at BWI that are willing to offer this practice experience are Air Tran, American and Continental. Visit our provider database at www.pathfindersforautism.org/ProviderSearch.aspx and select provider type Miscellaneous Services and Products and then choose Vacations for the contact information of these airlines' BWI Customer Service Managers.

**Stay busy**

What will your child have to keep him busy during the travel time or maybe the wait time at an airport? Don't forget to bring those favorite toys and activities, snacks or items that bring comfort to your child. Make sure you include some non-electronic items for those "turn off your electronics" times during the flight. Before you pack that bag, you may want to double check with your airline's carry-on baggage rules.

**Take care of those ears**

Lots of people = lots of noise. Not to mention most of us are able to tune-out the noisy hum of the plane’s ventilation system. These sounds may be amplified for our kids, so you may want to bring a set of ear plugs or headphones. Bring gum or hard candy to help relieve popping in your child's ears, or check with your doctor or pharmacist about ear drops.

I would like to add a special thank you to Bianca Bennett and Diane McNally at Southwest for their time, assistance, and openness.

Shelly McLaughlin, Pathfinders for Autism © 2010 Pathfinders for Autism

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**Download an Air Travel Guide for Children with Autism**


This guide is written for an airport in England, however the processes described are relevant to U.S. travel.