

How do you make a destination autism-friendly?

April 2 2018, by Beth J. Harpaz



This July 21, 2017 photo shows a Champion Autism Network golf cart decorated with puzzle pieces, a symbol for autism, in Surfside, S.C., with the Surfside Pier in the background. The golf cart is sponsored by area businesses who purchase puzzle pieces and get their logos printed on them. The Champion Autism Network works with local businesses and attractions in the Myrtle Beach area, including venues in Surfside, to make the destination more welcoming to visitors with kids on the autism spectrum by training workers in the hospitality industry to be sensitive to their needs. (Becky Large via AP)

Myrtle Beach , South Carolina, has a busy boardwalk and all kinds of attractions, from mini-golf courses and water parks to a zip line and a Ferris wheel.

So it might not be an obvious destination for families with kids on the [autism](#) spectrum who may be easily overwhelmed by noise and commotion. But an organization called Champion Autism Network is working with hotels, restaurants and other venues to make the area autism-friendly.

"If you're going to invite the autism world to play with you on the beach, you have to have people be aware," said Champion Autism Network founder Becky Large, whose son is on the spectrum. "We've trained hotels, restaurants and others and it's really paying off."

Large started Champion Autism Network (CAN) in 2016, working with the Myrtle Beach airport to open a "quiet room" where kids could decompress from the stresses of air travel. She then began reaching out to local businesses, offering staff training. Families present a CAN card at participating venues as a way to discreetly signal their needs, and the businesses offer CAN families discounts and services like skipping the wait line.

"They show the card and the staff will know where to seat you, how to treat you," Large said. "They know it's possible there might be some awkward social behavior. The person might become overstimulated. They might have to wrap up the food before it's even served."

The biggest takeaway from CAN's training? When kids on the spectrum "become overstimulated or have a tantrum or a meltdown, they're not just being naughty children that parents can't control," Large said.

"Rather than being judgmental, recognize that this is a family in crisis. Offer a friendly hand and a smile."

Large founded CAN to serve locals, but some 450 families now have CAN cards from as far away as Minnesota, New York, Canada and Germany. Large has also fielded inquiries from other destinations looking to replicate the program. "I would like nothing better than if I could land a national chain to want to be the first autism-friendly hotel chain," she said.

John Ordover, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, was in Myrtle Beach the first week of April for a third visit. His teenage son Arren is "almost non-verbal and has a long list of requirements to make a hotel room safe," said Ordover, whose wife, Carol Greenburg, is co-editor of the "Thinking Person's Guide to Autism."

Hair dryers, irons, coffeemakers, glassware, pens and pencils must be removed and the toilet tank cover must be secured. But he had nothing but praise for Ocean Creek Resort , where they're staying: "They did a spectacular job with the room," said Ordover, adding that he's grateful to "have a place to take our son for spring break that he loves, where he is accepted, and where we don't have to constantly explain or apologize for him."

Ocean Creek Resort's general manager Sabrina Hilliard has a son with autism and makes CAN's training mandatory for her staff. "We can make the room as safe as possible," Hilliard said. "We can do curbside check-in. We can make special provisions in the restaurant, to make sure we have things stocked to meet their needs, and make arrangements with housekeeping to do services at times that meet their schedule."

CAN also has support from attractions like a bowling alley and Ripley's Aquarium , which host "sensory-friendly" events with modified lighting

and sounds. A movie theater hosts CAN families for monthly screenings of films like "Wonder Woman" where lights stay on, the sound is down and viewers can get up and move around.

CAN is also organizing an April 20-21 festival screening new films by or about someone with autism.

Hilliard's best advice for hospitality workers or anyone encountering a family coping with an overwhelmed child is simple: "Never judge. Go up and ask, 'Hey, is there anything I can help you with?' It's so much more meaningful than the stares and the 'oh, she can't control her kid' or 'that kid is being a brat.' Sometimes just a reassuring smile makes a difference."

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