

How the tourism industry, and other travelers, can help families of autistic children get the break they deserve

August 21 2023, by Brian Garrod, Allan Jepson and Raphaela Stadler



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Going on a family holiday is [not always a relaxing](#) experience. It can involve traffic jams, airport queues and stress. Even so, most of us look forward to going away for the change of scenery and break from our everyday routines.

For [autistic children](#), though, these changes in environment and routine can be [difficult to cope with](#). And [our research](#) suggests that this can make their [family](#) holidays extremely fraught affairs.

Some of the British parents we spoke to said the challenges of taking their autistic [children](#) away on holiday were so great that they would only go on short trips (35% only ever spent one or two nights away). Many did their best to avoid peak travel times and other situations in which their child might become overstimulated.

A large majority (over 80%) only ever took their holidays in the UK, rather than going abroad. Some said they chose not to go away on holiday at all, and took day trips instead to avoid overnight stays.

Many told us that having an autistic child had a significant effect on when, where and how they took family holidays. One parent commented, "I need a holiday myself by the time I get back from having my son full-time on my own."

Another said their latest holiday was so "traumatic [that it] made us cancel a future holiday and put us off trying to go again."

Reactions of other holidaymakers

Overall, our research found several common reasons why parents found it difficult to take their autistic children away on a family holiday. We were surprised to learn that the biggest factor was the reactions of other holidaymakers to their child's behavior.

Autistic children can often [become anxious](#) when they encounter new and unfamiliar stimuli, which of course come thick and fast on holiday. And when an autistic child becomes overwhelmed by anxiety, they may become visibly upset or engage in something known as [self-stimulating](#)

[behavior](#), or "[stimming](#)," which can involve things like rocking in a seat, flapping hands, banging toys together, or pacing up and down.



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Some parents (from a sample of 295 families with autistic children) told us this was often interpreted by others as "bad behavior," and that they felt judged for not being able to control their offspring.

Nearly half of the parents in our survey considered interactions with other holidaymakers to be a difficult aspect of traveling with an autistic child. Many of these said that other holidaymakers seemed to lack understanding or empathy for their child's condition. Some would glare, while others even scolded the child themselves.

Avoiding triggers

Going on excursions or to events was another stressful part of holidays, according to our survey participants. Many chose to avoid them and stay close to their accommodation throughout their trip.

But this then raised another issue which came up frequently—how to entertain an autistic child's siblings. Some autistic children, for example, can be sensitive to [loud noises](#), [bright lights](#) and strong smells—which may well feature in the kinds of places their siblings find exciting and want to visit. As one mother explained, "The holiday is supposed to be for the whole family, but my whole time is spent calming and attending to my autistic daughter due to her heightened struggles on holiday. My younger child and other family members do not have the holiday [they expect to have]."

Parents also mentioned that while the travel industry as a whole seems to have made significant gains in terms of meeting the needs of people with mobility issues, those with other needs are poorly served by comparison.

Some said that things like quiet spaces at airports or fast-track queues at amusement parks would be extremely helpful. Alternative ideas included the provision of noise-canceling headphones on flights, and [weighted blankets](#) and blackout blinds in hotels.

Other holidaymakers can also do a lot to help. As fellow travelers, and often fellow parents, we need to be more aware of the challenges that taking an [autistic child](#) on [holiday](#) can involve.

Our research strongly suggests that a more tolerant attitude towards the behavior of autistic children, and a greater degree of empathy with their parents, would go a long way to helping the whole family get the break they deserve.

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