

LIGHTHOUSE FREE PARENT GUIDE

Flying with Your Autistic Child

The complete preparation guide — comfort bag, airport strategy,
and a calm plan for every stage of the journey.

Guiding families from diagnosis to thriving

Preparation Beats Perfection

Flying with an autistic child can feel daunting — new environment, loud sounds, pressure changes, unpredictable delays. But thousands of families do it successfully, and preparation is the difference. This guide covers the two weeks before, the packing, the airport, and the flight itself.

Even if the flight isn't perfect, you'll be prepared — and that's what matters.

1

Before Travel Day

The prep that makes everything easier

- **Talk through the trip with a simple story: airport, plane, seatbelt, landing, destination.**

Pictures or a short social story reduce the unknown — and the unknown is the enemy.

- **If considering melatonin for sleep, ask your pediatrician first — then do a trial run AT HOME.**

Never introduce anything new on travel day. Test the dose and timing at home nights before.

- **Practice wearing headphones or earplugs at home for short periods.**

Cabin noise is constant. Familiar gear works better than brand-new gear.

- **Contact TSA Cares at least 72 hours before flying (855-787-2227).**

A free U.S. program that provides support through security screening for travelers with disabilities.

- **Ask the airline about early boarding for families with disabilities.**

Boarding calmly before the crowd can change the entire flight's trajectory.

2

The Comfort Bag

Pack these five categories

- **Comfort & familiarity: favorite blanket or stuffed animal, a photo of you, a small familiar toy.**

Familiar smells and textures are grounding during takeoff and landing. Pack a backup photo.

- **Sensory support: noise-canceling headphones, a fidget or chewable, sunglasses for bright cabins.**

Engine hum plus pressure changes can overwhelm — give their senses somewhere safe to go.

- **Sleep support: kids' eye mask if tolerated, layered clothing, approved sleep aid if cleared by your doctor.**

Planes run cold. Comfort equals calm equals (hopefully) sleep.

- **Snacks & hydration: familiar favorites only, an empty water bottle to fill after security, a chewy snack for descent.**

Chewing and sipping relieve ear pressure. Travel day is not the day for new foods.

- **Entertainment: tablet loaded with offline shows, comfortable headphones, one NEW surprise activity saved for mid-flight.**

Download everything before leaving home — airport wifi will betray you.

3

At the Airport

Navigating the busiest part calmly

- **Arrive with extra buffer time — rushing transfers stress straight to your child.**

A calm parent is the best regulation tool in the building.

- **Use TSA Cares support at security if you arranged it.**

They can provide a private screening area and walk your family through at your pace.

- **Find a quiet corner near the gate rather than the crowded seating area.**

Many airports also have sensory rooms now — ask at information.

- **Let your child move: walk the terminal, count the planes at the window.**

Movement before a long sit is money in the regulation bank.

4

On the Plane

The flight itself

- **Offer a drink, chewy snack, or lollipop during takeoff and descent.**

Swallowing and chewing equalize ear pressure — the most common source of distress.

- **Deploy the comfort bag in stages, not all at once.**

Save the surprise activity for the restless middle stretch of the flight.

- **If a meltdown happens, focus only on your child — not the strangers around you.**

Your child's nervous system needs you. The opinions of row 14 do not.

- **Celebrate landing together — you both did it.**

Every successful flight builds the template for the next one.

“The goal was never a perfect flight.

*The goal was showing your child the world is bigger than their routine —
and that you'll be right beside them in all of it.”*

— With love, from parents who've been there

This guide is free. Share it with any family who needs it.