



ENJOYING THE AMUSEMENT PARK

The amusement park is a family vacation favorite. Children and parents alike look forward to the thrills and chills offered by the park rides, shows and variety of traveling characters and entertainment typically occurring throughout the park. For a family living with autism this option may be more challenging, believing the experience would be more exasperating than enjoyable because of issues that could and would probably arise. Today, a respect and desire to service individuals' special needs along with accommodations at amusement parks create more inviting opportunities for a day of fun. With some planning -- and of course ample sun block -- the entire family can enjoy the day, experience the thrills, and create beautiful memories at the amusement park.

- 1. Preparation is crucial for many individuals on the spectrum.** It is important to determine how much preparation, and what is most appropriate, for your loved one.
- 2. Prepare visuals in advance of the day.** Create social stories and picture books to help your loved one prepare for the park. Print pictures off of the website, or gather from friends who have already been to the park. Include a variety of pictures of the park itself, its rides, and characters. Include pictures of any family or friends who will accompany you to the park. It will help prepare for the day, and could provide comfort if anxieties rise while at the park. Afterward you can replace generic pictures of the park with actual pictures from your visit to create a photo album.
- 3. Practice situations you anticipate may be anxiety producing.** Role-play scenarios with your loved one in preparation for unpleasant occurrences. Some situations -- such as a last minute shut-down of a ride, long lines, or bad weather -- occur randomly at an amusement park and must be considered. To help with those who are gravitationally-challenged, for instance, you can practice having their feet dangle from a variety of heights and over the ground and water where their feet will dangle. Practice this so it feels more comfortable, and if they get anxious, clap their feet together. Should a ride stop with their feet in mid-air, this technique can be soothing to prevent panic and stress. Identify various situations that may be the most unpleasant and develop the best strategies for such situations. Practice them sporadically before your family's trip, since such occurrences are unpredictable.
- 4. Prepare for the change in routine.** While an amusement park is fun, it still is a change in the typical routine. Use a calendar and mark off the days approaching your visit. If your loved one has a tendency to become anxious when anticipating a future event, you may want to wait until just before your visit to share the news.
- 5. Develop a response plan if things get overwhelming.** Become familiar with the layout of the park. Study the map and find guest services. Identify potential "respite" locations in each region where you could remove your loved one from external stimulation. While "sensory friendly" locations may be designated throughout the park, become familiar with

what these locations offer and decide ahead of time if they are suited for your loved one. Perhaps pack a bag with earplugs, stimulating toys, a handheld fan, picture books, and/or weighted items to soothe the situation. Consider developing a signal or cue for those who are non-verbal to show when they are getting anxious, and prompt them to use the signal to alert family members. Effective options considered in advance empower the family to manage concerns rather than forcing everyone to leave for the day, or avoid the activity all together.

6. **Prepare family and friends.** Share what could be common alert signals for escalating concerns, such as increasing anxiety or sensory overload, and the best strategies needed in response to these issues. A great team increases the probability for success at the park.
7. **Make sure acceptable food options are available.** Check the website for special diet options available at the park, and plan accordingly. And even if not on a special diet, be cautious of the amount of sugar consumed.
8. **Provide specific parameters if your loved one begins to obsess about a particular ride or show.** One suggestion is to provide tokens equal to allowed repeated experience. Exchange one chip for one ride/show. If it is not possible for the family to go on a ride, it is best to be upfront, direct and specific about your intentions from the beginning.
9. **Bring sunglasses.** Sunglasses can be a great crisis intervention tool. They change one's visual perception, so that everything doesn't look so scary. They can also be helpful should the ride have to be stopped, and people are asked to walk on the "catwalk" to safety. The glasses help keep the visual focus on the dark glasses, rather than on the surroundings as you walk to safety.
10. **Consider inviting the care provider.** If your weekly schedule includes a one-on-one caregiver, he or she may be a wonderful addition to the day's festivities. It is also a nice way to say "thank you" for the important job they do.

Above all, stop and consider what you know about your family member with special needs. Know how much noise and the degree of sensory input they can handle. Consider anxiety triggers and what is needed to soothe your loved one. Evaluate the amount of preparation it may take. Anticipate both your loved one's strengths and weaknesses, and plan accordingly. Set him or her up for success. Start slow and work your way up to outside situations that involve more intense crowds and sensations. A day at the park is most enjoyable for the family when the entire family is able to enjoy the experience.

Canada's Wonderland is a wonderful park destination for families and friends of individuals with special needs. Their Guest Services staff is available to answer questions for families preparing to visit the park, as well as to provide assistance during your stay. Their goal is to make your experience at the park both smooth and full of family fun.