

Autism Vacation Preparation Checklist

Helping Your Child Feel Safe, Prepared, and Ready for New Adventures

Destination: _____

Vacation Dates: _____

Transportation: ☐ Car ☐ Plane ☐ Train ☐ Other _____

Lodging: _____

2–3 Weeks Before Vacation

Prepare your child

- ☐ Tell your child about the vacation.
- ☐ Mark the vacation on a calendar.
- ☐ Begin talking about where you're going.
- ☐ Show pictures of the destination.
- ☐ Watch short YouTube videos of the location.
- ☐ Look at pictures of the hotel, cabin, Airbnb, or family's home.
- ☐ Start reading your vacation social story every day.
- ☐ Count down the days until vacation.



Create a Vacation Social Story

Suggested pictures to include:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Packing suitcase | ☐ Driving to hotel |
| ☐ Getting into the car | ☐ Hotel room |
| ☐ Driving to airport (if flying) | ☐ Bedroom |
| ☐ Checking luggage | ☐ Bathroom |
| ☐ Going through security | ☐ Pool |
| ☐ Waiting at the gate | ☐ Restaurant(s) |
| ☐ Boarding the airplane | ☐ Planned activities |
| ☐ Sitting on the airplane | ☐ Returning home |
| ☐ Picking up luggage | |



Karen's Clinical Note:

Use REAL pictures whenever possible. If you can't, images found on the internet or hand drawn pictures work great. The goal is helping your child know exactly what to expect.

One Week Before

Practice New Routines

- ☐ Read the social story daily.
- ☐ Practice packing.
- ☐ Let your child help choose clothes.
- ☐ Let them choose comfort items.
- ☐ Practice sleeping with the travel white noise machine (if using one).
- ☐ Talk about changes in routine.
- ☐ Explain that vacations are different, but everyone will help.

Make/Gather Your Visual Supports

- ☐ Portable visual schedule
- ☐ First-Then board
- ☐ Choice board
- ☐ Break card
- ☐ Emotion visuals
- ☐ Visual timer
- ☐ AAC device charged
- ☐ Communication boards printed



Packing Checklist

Comfort Items

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Favorite blanket | ☐ White noise machine |
| ☐ Favorite stuffed animal | ☐ Headphones |
| ☐ Favorite pillow | ☐ Sunglasses |
| ☐ Favorite pajamas | ☐ Fidget toys |
| ☐ Bedtime book | ☐ Chewy necklaces (if used) |
| ☐ Night light | ☐ Weighted lap pad/blanket (if helpful) |

Favorite Activities

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Coloring | ☐ Puzzles |
| ☐ Books | ☐ Playdough |
| ☐ Tablet | ☐ Cars |
| ☐ Play Figures | ☐ Snacks |
| ☐ Favorite toys | ☐ Other: _____ |
| ☐ Sensory items | ☐ Other: _____ |



Communication Supports

- ☐ AAC device
- ☐ Charger
- ☐ Communication board
- ☐ Visual schedule
- ☐ First-Then board
- ☐ Dry erase marker
- ☐ Picture icons



Medical Needs

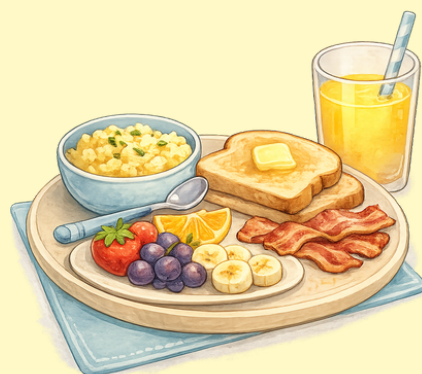
- ☐ Medication
- ☐ Extra medication
- ☐ Insurance card
- ☐ Emergency contacts
- ☐ Doctor information



Travel Day

Before leaving...

- ☐ Eat breakfast.
- ☐ Review today's visual schedule.
- ☐ Explain today's plan.
- ☐ Review the social story.
- ☐ Bring plenty of snacks.
- ☐ Bring drinks.
- ☐ Pack comfort items where they're easy to reach.
- ☐ Charge all electronics



During Travel

- ☐ Offer movement breaks.
- ☐ Use headphones if needed.
- ☐ Praise flexibility.
- ☐ Update the visual schedule.
- ☐ Give warnings before transitions.
- ☐ Allow preferred activities.
- ☐ Celebrate completed steps.



Karen's Clinical Note:

Instead of saying, "Calm down," try saying: "You're safe." "I know this is different." "We'll figure it out together." Those words often provide much more reassurance.

At Your Destination

- ☐ Show your child where they will sleep.
- ☐ Show them the bathroom.
- ☐ Show where meals will happen.
- ☐ Review today's visual schedule.
- ☐ Keep bedtime as close to home as possible.
- ☐ Schedule downtime every day.
- ☐ Keep favorite comfort items nearby.
- ☐ Let your child explore the room.
- ☐ Review tomorrow's plans before bed.

When a Meltdown Happens...

Remember:

- ☐ Stay calm.
- ☐ Lower your voice.
- ☐ Reduce talking.
- ☐ Remove unnecessary demands.
- ☐ Move to a quieter location.
- ☐ Offer comfort items.
- ☐ Give space if needed.
- ☐ Use deep breathing.
- ☐ Use visuals.
- ☐ Wait before trying to teach or reason.
- ☐ Remember your child is communicating, not misbehaving.

My Calm-Down Plan

These things usually help me...

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ Quiet space | ☐ Fidget |
| ☐ Deep breathing | ☐ Music |
| ☐ Walk outside | ☐ Snack |
| ☐ Headphones | ☐ Drink |
| ☐ Favorite toy | ☐ Hugs |
| ☐ Blanket | ☐ Alone time |
| ☐ Other: _____ | |

Understanding the Meltdown Cycle



Celebrate Success!

After each day ask:

- ★ *My favorite part today was:*
- ★ *Tomorrow I'm excited to:*
- ★ *Something I did really well today:*



Karen's Clinical Note:

A perfect vacation isn't the goal. A child who feels safe, understood, and supported is.



After the Vacation: Keep the Learning Going!

Returning home is another transition that can be difficult for some autistic children. Spending time talking about the vacation can help your child process the experience while continuing to build language and communication skills.



Helping Your Child Remember the Trip

- ☐ Look through vacation photos together.
- ☐ Let your child choose their favorite pictures.
- ☐ Name the people in the photos.
- ☐ Talk about where you were and what everyone was doing.
- ☐ Label emotions ("You were so excited to see the ocean!")
- ☐ Talk about favorite foods, places, and activities.
- ☐ Compare the vacation to home
- ☐ Talk about what happened first, next, then, and last.
- ☐ Make a "My Vacation Book" with photos from the trip.



Karen's Clinical Note:

The best conversations often happen after the vacation, not during it. Looking at photos together provides visual support that makes recalling events much easier. Those conversations naturally build vocabulary, sequencing, storytelling, social communication, and confidence.

About the Author



Karen Taylor, M.S., CCC-SLP, CAS **Speech-Language Pathologist • Certified Autism Specialist**

With more than 30 years of experience, Karen Taylor has dedicated her career to helping children develop communication, language, speech, and social interaction skills. She is passionate about translating research into practical, easy-to-use strategies that help parents, educators, and professionals support children every day.

Experience at a Glance

- 🎓 30+ Years of Clinical Experience
- 🧩 Autism & Communication Specialist
- 🌍 International Training & Outreach (Ethiopia)
- 👨👩👧👦 Helping Families & Professionals Worldwide

Continue Learning at Universal Speech Strategies

This checklist is just one of many free resources designed to help children build communication through everyday routines and play.

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