

# Holidays and Vacations

We've all seen the advertisements for family fun. Smiling children and parents with their arms around one another, beaming into the camera as they frolic through a field, swim in the ocean, or squeal in delight as rollercoasters roar to new heights. Many parents have an expectation that a family vacation will be filled with non-stop joy and wonder why the reality rarely lives up to the hyped expectation. Vacations provide a change in routine and amount of structure, as well as exposure to new experiences. For some, this is exciting and provides a much-needed respite from day-to-day schedules. For others, the variation in routine raises anxiety and stress. For many of us, both are true—we look forward to a new experience and also feel anxious about the unknown.

Holidays are also laden with explicit and implicit expectations. Certain foods must appear. Family members return to fixed roles. Gatherings can be simultaneously wonderful and stressful, as everybody has their own agenda and sense of how the holiday should be celebrated. Adherence to strict expectations can often lead to disappointment.

Children who need routines and structure to make sense of the world around them often find the less structured nature of vacations stressful. They also struggle with adhering to the established norms for holiday gatherings; they may be required to participate in traditions that do not appeal to them, with larger groups than they are accustomed to. How do we help our children participate in as well as enjoy family celebrations and vacations? How do we set the stage for success?

Within this chapter you will learn:

- Why vacations and holidays are challenging for your child:
  - changes to routine
  - increased social interactions
  - traveling with teens
- Strategies to help your family manage vacation glitches:
  - taking transportation
  - choosing a destination
  - balancing divergent needs and interests
- Strategies to help your family participate in holiday celebrations:
  - clarifying expectations
  - developing traditions that work for everyone
  - providing options

## **When expectations get in the way of reality**

Colleen, mom of 8-year-old Aidan, came to the topic night confused about why vacations were so exasperating and wondering how other parents were managing.

“Our last vacation was so frustrating,” Colleen began. “We were going to historic sites and museums in Washington, DC. We let our children each pick one site to go to, and then we took turns at each one. Aidan’s pick was the Air and Space Museum. We had been to the other sites his brother and sister chose earlier in the vacation and now it was his turn. But when we finally got there and we had to wait in a short line, Aidan fell apart.”

“Mom, I want to go in now. I need to go in now!” Aidan started yelling. Everyone was looking at us and then looking away.

“Aidan, we will go in,” Colleen said in a quiet voice. “There are ten people in front of us, and we need to wait our turn. It won’t be long.”

“No, I need to go in now,” Aidan screamed. “It’s not fair that I have to wait.” Now people were actively backing away.

Colleen didn’t know what to do. She just wanted to have an enjoyable holiday with her family.

### **Why are vacations and holidays so stressful?**

- *Change:* We are taking our children out of their normal routine and asking them to manage in a new setting, with new activities and new people. None of that is easy when you use routines and familiar people to help make sense of the larger world.
- *Demands:* Vacations require compromise and flexibility. Although we can make a plan for vacations, inevitably, some aspect of our time away from home will go differently than we anticipated. When the inevitable glitches occur, our children may not have the extra patience or tolerance required to manage.
- *Increased togetherness:* Many children with Asperger’s need time alone to lower the strain they can feel from having to participate in demanding social interactions. Vacations often mean more time together in a smaller space. If our children don’t get to alleviate their anxiety, triggers will easily set them off.
- *Social expectations:* Vacations are often spent in public settings surrounded by unfamiliar people. Although parents and siblings will recognize the social norms of the new environments, our children with Asperger’s may not. Parents may feel more pressure for their child to fit behaviorally. When parents let the pressure to conform overtake their own understanding of their child’s capabilities at that moment in time, their stress and anxiety may overflow onto their child.
- *Developmental delay:* Children with Asperger’s are delayed in their development of social-emotional and social-pragmatic skills. When parents vacation where children’s activities are divided by age range, they may find that their child does not fit well in their chronological age category. A mismatch of activity and child’s interest or abilities leads to stress and frustration.
- *Large social gatherings:* Often at holiday time, extended families gather. Even if children are in their own home to celebrate a holiday, a variety of family members or friends are in attendance as well. Some children with Asperger’s find large

gatherings of people, even people they know, overwhelming. Additional expectations for social interactions may also raise anxiety.

So does this mean that vacations and holiday gatherings are doomed to fail? Should we just give up, stay home, and let our children do exactly as they please? We don't have to take such extreme measures, although it may feel as if we should just cocoon at home to avoid the additional stressors. Our children need exposure to and practice with handling travel and larger family gatherings. Going to either extreme—vacationing with no accommodation for your child or boycotting opportunities away from home—is unhealthy and unhelpful. Finding the correct balance between exposure to new experiences with the support and structure needed to keep anxiety and stress at a manageable level is crucial. Skills our children demonstrate at home may not make an appearance on vacation or while staying with relatives. Your child isn't trying to make your life difficult; he's struggling with increased demands.

Excerpted from *Parenting without Panic: A Pocket Support Group for Parents of Children and Teens on the Autism Spectrum (Asperger's Syndrome)* by Brenda Dater  
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