

DOING DISNEY WITH AUTISM

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1. Do your homework.

I used Pinterest and Google to find maps, guides, and tips from Disney travel experts, but the site I found most helpful was [WDW Prep School](#). Shannon has resources for planning your daily itinerary and packing your park bag, as well as crowd calendars, tips by month, special event advice, and podcasts. Once we decided when we wanted to go and where we wanted to stay, we used a travel agent with AAA to take some of the load off of us, but it's not necessary.

Note: Shannon does have a membership site, but I found everything I needed for free.

2. Consider your child's needs when booking your hotel, resort, or condo.

We knew we wanted to stay on Disney property, which allowed us to take Disney transportation and be at the parks quickly. Since we were only taking a short vacation, we wanted to maximize our time and give Henry a full Disney experience. If you're staying a whole week, this may not be the best option for you. Maybe it's not affordable. Maybe you want an off-property condominium with a full kitchen. Just look at pros and cons of each option to determine what best fit your needs and budget.

If you are looking at Disney properties, your priorities will help you decide which one. For example, if you need quick access to your hotel in case of an emergency rest period, a hotel on the monorail system might be best for you. If your child is afraid of characters in costume, pick a place where surprise sightings won't occur.

3. Plan each day.

I used Shannon's suggestions plus [this map](#) of the Magic Kingdom to plan out our day and organize our Fast Passes. (The site has maps of the other Disney parks as well.) I

typed out a tentative itinerary for each day, including food in each area we might want to try, and laminated it in case of rain.

This may sound like a good tip for anyone, but I would argue it's critical for us. Without a plan, you will wander, waste time, and frustrate your loved one with autism. Set yourself up for success!

4. Utilize Disney's autism-friendly resources.

I recommend taking a look at the [WDW resource on planning a trip for those with cognitive disabilities and autism](#). This guide will give you information on each attraction and will also answer the ever-popular question on where to take **sensory breaks** on p. 43! Keep in mind, sensory breaks look different for every individual. For Henry, it wasn't so important to search out the suggestions on Disney's guide. Finding all the available toy trains in the gift shop was a great break for him. He also enjoyed sitting on a bench and watching the cars at Tomorrowland Speedway.

Go to guest services first thing and have the Disability Access Service (DAS) pass in case you need it. [Read more about the pass here](#) and [here](#). Even if you think your child won't need it, do this as soon as you enter the park. Later on there will be a long line, and you want to have it just in case. (We learned this lesson the hard way.)

Essentially, if the ride you want has a long line and you don't have a FastPass, the attendant gives you a return time to enter without wait. On one occasion, we were allowed to enter right away. In the meantime, you have a snack, take a break on a bench, ride something else, people-watch, or whatever your child needs.

5. Involve your child in the planning.

When we decided on Art of Animation resort, we allowed Henry to see pictures of the different room options. The resort is organized into different areas with multiple buildings, and he chose Cars. We were thrilled to arrive and see the landscaping around our building was even designed to look like Radiator Springs. This may seem like a small thing, but it made Henry's experience even more special.

This idea works regardless of the resort you choose. Allow your children to see photos ahead of time. Point out features you think they'll enjoy. Let them know where they will be sleeping. Henry is always very interested to know what kind of bed he will have. What we take for granted is of vital importance to them.

Youtube proved to be especially helpful in involving Henry as well. Many parents want their children to experience the rides they remember from childhood, and I am no exception, but we autism parents know that flexibility is the name of the game.

The trip is about the children, not us. Henry watched many videos of rides to see what looked interesting to him. The obvious benefit here is to prepare your child, but the added benefit is boosting your child's excitement for the trip.

6. Set realistic expectations and be flexible.

You may have noticed my word "tentative" under point #3. While I had attractions I wanted to see and food I wanted to taste, I knew this trip was about Henry and designed the itinerary with him in mind. Still, with children - especially autistic children - it's important to remember that altering the plan is not an "if" but a "when." Go with the flow and follow the child's interests and needs.

We intentionally planned a short trip to gauge Henry's interest and ability; we knew we could come back if the trip was a success and Henry seemed to want more parks. With that in mind, we planned to spend two days in Magic Kingdom to allow for an un-rushed, Henry-led visit. By afternoon on the first day, we realized Henry had done all he wanted to do. When we went to guest services for the DAS, we also asked if we could change our second-day tickets to Magic Kingdom to a different park; they said yes!

It's important to set realistic expectations not only for flexibility, as illustrated above, but also with the meals and events you book ahead of time, the length of your day in the park, and more, which leads me to our last point.

7. Remember: If it works at home, it works at Disney.

If your child needs something at home, he needs it everywhere. This might mean headphones, hand fidgets, visual schedules, social stories, therapeutic routines, afternoon naps, or early bedtimes. Only you know what your child requires to be regulated, healthy, and happy.

Henry has always been early to bed, early to rise. Staying up later doesn't make him sleep later. We also know if we don't respect his need for rest, after a few days he is physically ill. We have seen him grow lethargic and even vomit when overstimulated and overtired. What that meant for our Disney trip was no Wishes fireworks show at the Magic Kingdom. I hear you – so sad! We all wanted to do it. Henry especially wanted to see Tinkerbell “fly” out of the castle window. Unfortunately, the Wishes performance that night was at 10:00pm. (It is not the same each day.) Henry was already requesting to go back to the hotel at 7:00pm.

Disney is totally doable with autism! People do it every single day. In sum, do it your way. Your experience doesn't have to look like anyone else's. Have more questions? Feel free to drop me a line at meredithdangel@gmail.com