



SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH ASD ON FIELD TRIPS

Field trips teach students about what goes on in the world outside of the classroom. They can be enriching and engaging experiences for all students. Yet for many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), field trips can be anxiety-provoking and cause great distress. Preparation is the key to reducing anxiety ahead of a field trip and for helping the day go well for students with ASD.

Due to their preference for consistency and sameness, students with ASD sometimes have difficulty when their day to day schedules are disrupted by a field trip. Some students wander, run away, tantrum, or display other difficult behaviors when under stress, which can be significant safety issues that can make the day even more complicated.

In the past, these concerns have prompted some schools to exclude students with ASD from field trips or to require that parents accompany their child as a condition of attending the trip. While a school may invite a parent to accompany a student with a disability on a field trip, federal law, in particular Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, prohibits schools from requiring parents of students with disabilities to attend a field trip, if a similar obligation is not imposed upon the parents of students without disabilities. A school that requires only students with ASD to be accompanied by a parent on a field trip discriminates on the basis of disability.

Furthermore, refusing to allow a student with a disability to attend a field trip may be a denial of a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Prior to excluding a student with a disability from a field trip, the school must consider if accommodations and supports will allow the student to attend, thereby giving the student equal access to the school program.

Many of the same accommodations and supports your child receives on a regular

basis will also be helpful on a field trip. These include advance preparation for changes of routine, picture schedules, and perhaps a one-on-one aide. Your child will need to be prepared for the entire day of the field trip, not just for what will happen at the destination. Ideally teachers will do much of the preparation, but many parents find it helpful to work with the student at home too. Below are suggestions to help parents and teachers prepare children for field trips:

- Begin planning well in advance. Teachers and parents can add the trip to a posted calendar and “count down” until the trip. Talk about the trip daily, especially as the time for it draws near. Parents should ask teachers about planned trips at the beginning of the school year (perhaps at “back to school” night) as permission forms don’t always go home far enough in advance.
- Talk about what will happen on the trip far ahead of time. Many destinations have websites with virtual tours or other information to help plan the day. Involve your child in discovering what to expect. But make sure you check with your child’s teacher to find out what exhibits or attractions the class will be visiting. You don’t want your child expecting to visit the mummy exhibit at the museum when the purpose of the trip is to examine ancient artifacts.
- Teachers can create Social Stories™ to help students learn what to expect the day of the trip. Make sure the story includes waiting, taking turns, and the need to be flexible if the plan gets disrupted.
- Teachers can create worksheets, targeted to each student’s level, to help students prepare for the trip. For example, worksheets can have students circle pictures of things the class will see on the field trip and cross out pictures of what will not take place.
- Teachers can customize a written or picture schedule of the day of the field trip for your child. This way your child can know which parts of the regular school day will be disrupted or altered. Depending on the field trip itself and your child’s needs, the schedule may be able to be quite detailed. The schedule should include breaks and how time will be spent during downtime. Also, be sure to include what happens at the end of the day, and let the child know that the following school day will resume the regular routine (or not).
- Many field trips necessitate quick and frequent transitions. When possible, teachers should develop a plan to warn students prior to a transition or

provide a time limit for activities (particularly ones which may be preferred). These can be done on the schedule, can be verbal prompts, or can even utilize assistive technology (for example, timers).

- Review how your child will get to the destination. Some trips use school buses, chartered buses, trains, and parent drivers. Make sure your child knows what to expect. Consider who your child will sit with. Will there be assigned seats with class “buddies” or will students choose their own seat? Will your child need an aide to be nearby? If so, make sure your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) provides for this.
- If adults other than the students’ regular teachers will be involved with the trip, explain who these people are ahead of time, even providing pictures, names, and responsibilities if these details might be helpful. Make sure that students know which adults (chaperones, staff at the field trip destination, etc.) are “in charge” and what this means.
- Have a plan in place for what happens if a student has a meltdown. Extra chaperones are always a good idea if space and finances allow, and may be a necessary accommodation for some students.
- Take sensory sensitivities into account. Field trips often entail temperature extremes, noise, and crowds. The student should be taught how to communicate discomfort and how (and to whom) to request a break.
- If your child needs to take medication during the trip, make sure there is a plan in place. A student, who independently remembers to go to the nurse’s office after 5th period to take a pill, may not remember to ask for the pill on the field trip.
- Plan ahead for lunches and snack breaks. Pack favorite snacks and lunches that your child can easily open and eat without too much mess. Make sure your child has plenty of water, especially on hot days. If your child will need help with snacks/lunch, make sure a teacher or aide knows this and is there to help your child.
- Some schools use a “buddy system” on field trips or break into small groups. Talk with your child’s teacher about who are appropriate peers to accompany your child. If all students have a peer buddy, your child’s buddy should not be the aide or the teacher, though an adult can certainly accompany the buddies.
- Be sure to review safety rules and take safety precautions, such as having your child wear an identification bracelet.
- Teachers or aides can use a point chart or reward system to help motivate

a student throughout a field trip. Provide frequent positive reinforcement in advance of the trip and throughout the special day.

If the supports mentioned above are not in your child's current IEP, consider calling an IEP meeting to review your child's needs, or make a written request for specific supports to be added. If the school agrees, there may be no need to have a formal meeting, and the IEP can be amended by writing.

When approached with preparation, a field trip can be a wonderful opportunity for your child to practice important skills, such as flexibility, positive social interactions, and safety. Because the goal of education is ultimately to prepare your child for life experiences outside of the classroom, a field trip can be a step toward generalizing the skills your child is learning at school.

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