

Support for Holiday Travel

Holiday travel (whether it's a day trip, a weekend away, a long car ride, or a flight) can be exciting, but it can also bring big changes to routine, environment, sensory demands, and predictability.

If the person you support finds transitions challenging, sensory input overwhelming, or unfamiliar places stressful, travel may require extra planning. The good news is: travel can be much smoother with preparation, and small adjustments often make a significant difference.

Below is a detailed, therapist-informed guide to help families and carers prepare confidently.

Why travel can be challenging

- New or unpredictable environments
- Crowds, queues, noises, smells and bright lights
- Increased waiting times
- Long periods of sitting still (car/plane)
- Separation from familiar home routines
- Sleep disruptions
- Changes to food, hydration or toileting routines
- Sensory overwhelm in airports, train stations, service stations
- Difficulty communicating in unfamiliar environments
- Anxiety around the unknown



Preparing before you travel

Build predictability

Use tools such as:

- A visual travel schedule (e.g., "car → rest stop → holiday house → dinner")
- A countdown calendar
- Social stories explaining what travelling looks like
- Videos/photos of your destination
- Maps or pictures of the accommodation

For older children, teens and adults, include:

- Who will be there
- Where you will sleep
- What bathroom/kitchen looks like
- What the plan is for the first day

Practise travel-related tasks

Depending on the person's needs, you could practise:

- Sitting in the car with luggage packed
- Walking through a busy shopping centre (like a mini "airport")
- Wearing headphones
- Using a travel toilet or public bathrooms
- Going through a "pretend" security process

Prepare communication supports

Speech Pathologists recommend:

- Updating AAC devices with:
 - "Stop"
 - "I need a break"
 - "Too loud"
 - "Where are we going?"
 - "I need the toilet"
- Picture cards for:
 - Toilets
 - Food
 - Drink
 - Break
 - Help
- A communication passport for travel staff

Packing for success

Travel regulation kit (highly recommended)

Pack items that support sensory and emotional regulation:

- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Sunglasses or cap
- Fidget tools
- Chewable jewellery
- Soft comfort item
- Weighted lap pad (for car/plane)
- Small blanket or hoodie
- Portable fan (if sensitive to heat)
- Reassuring scents (lavender, favourite lotion)
- Water bottle
- Snacks familiar to the person
- Tablet with downloaded videos/apps
- Portable charger

Practical essentials

- Visual schedule or printed itinerary
- Medications & medication schedule
- First aid
- ID and NDIS card
- Spare clothing in carry-on
- Toileting supplies (including wipes, continence items)
- Familiar bedding (pillowcase, blanket)

This kit reduces overwhelm and helps with transitions across settings.



Supporting car travel

Common challenges

- Sitting for long periods
- Motion sickness
- Confined space
- Boredom or sensory overload

Helpful strategies

- Use a visual timeline for the drive
- Plan rest stops ahead of time
- Offer movement breaks: stretching, walking, deep pressure hugs
- Pre-load preferred music, white noise or audiobooks
- Keep food/water accessible
- For motion-sensitive clients, use:
 - Sunglasses
 - Window shades
 - Firm seat positioning
 - Cool airflow
- Warn about upcoming changes:
 - "5 minutes until we stop."
 - "After this song, we will get petrol."

Safety note

For clients with behavioural challenges, ensure safe seatbelt strategies and consult your Occupational Therapist (OT) for travel safety equipment if needed.

Supporting airport + flight travel

Before arriving

- Explain the steps: Arriving → check-in → security → gate → plane → take off → landing
- Show pictures or videos of airports, security checks and planes
- Pack sensory and communication supports in easy reach

At the airport

- Use priority lines if available
- Identify quiet spaces away from crowds
- Use noise-cancelling headphones
- Offer snacks and drinks
- Reduce waiting by arriving early without rushing
- Pre-load devices with entertainment

Going through security

- Practise removing shoes/bags at home
- Prepare for sensory discomfort: noise, bright lights, body scanners
- Use simple scripts:
 - “We put bags on the belt, we walk through, then we’re done.”



On the plane

- Use a take-off and landing routine (chewing, sucking, swallowing, sipping water)
- Create a “seat zone” with blankets or pillows
- Provide pressure input (weighted lap pad, firm hand on shoulder)
- Use visuals or timers to show flight duration
- Take short aisle walks if possible
- Use headphones, fidgets and high-interest activities

Supporting travel on public transport

Trains, trams and buses

- Prepare for unexpected noises (squealing brakes, announcements)
- Choose quieter seating if possible
- Use ear defenders or headphones
- Sit near exits for predictable transitions
- Have a clear “what to do if it's too much” plan



Staying in unfamiliar environments

Common challenges

- New smells, noises and lighting
- Unfamiliar sleeping arrangements
- Different bathroom/kitchen layouts

Helpful strategies

- Bring familiar bedding
- Stick to usual bedtime routines where possible
- Use white noise to block unfamiliar sounds
- Do a “house tour” when you arrive (bathroom, kitchen, quiet zone)
- Set up a mini calm space with:
 - blanket
 - fidgets
 - headphones
 - comfort items
- Post a simple daily schedule on the fridge or bedroom door
- Use visuals for new rules (e.g., pool safety, visitor planning)

Supporting sleep away from home

Sleep is often the hardest part of travel. Helpful strategies can include:

- Stick to pre-sleep rituals (bath, book, music, stretches)
- Bring familiar blankets or pillowcases
- Use blackout blinds or a travel sleep mask
- Keep room temperature comfortable
- Use white noise or soft music
- Give extra time for winding down—new environments take longer to settle
- If sleep becomes disrupted, reassure the person:
 - “It might feel different here. That’s okay. We can take our time.”



Managing sensory needs while travelling

Common sensory triggers

- Loud environments (airports, petrol stations, restaurants)
- Busy crowds
- Strong smells
- Heat
- Movement
- Bright lights

Sensory friendly strategies

- Offer choices: hat, sunglasses, hoodie, headphones
- Encourage deep pressure input during transitions
- Provide movement breaks
- Use calming visuals or grounding activities
- Keep snacks and water accessible
- Choose quieter seating locations whenever possible

Supporting emotional regulation during travel

Co-regulation ideas

- Slow breathing together
- Squeezing hands or using resistance bands
- Using “I feel...” cards or AAC
- Reassurance scripts:
 - “You’re safe.”
 - “I’m here.”
 - “We will take a break soon.”
 - “I can help you.”

Behaviour support strategies

- Keep expectations realistic
- Identify triggers early
- Have a calm exit plan
- Provide frequent breaks
- Reinforce even small successes

Travel preparation checklist

Before you leave

- ☐ Visual schedule or social story
- ☐ Updated AAC and communication cards
- ☐ Travel regulation kit packed
- ☐ Medications + schedule
- ☐ Familiar bedding
- ☐ Snacks and water
- ☐ First-day plan printed
- ☐ Destination photos reviewed

During travel

- ☐ Sensory tools accessible
- ☐ Movement breaks planned
- ☐ Communication supports ready
- ☐ Ear defenders/headphones available
- ☐ Visual timer for journey duration

At your destination

- ☐ Calm space set up
- ☐ Daily routine adapted
- ☐ Safety checks completed
- ☐ Sleep environment prepared