

# Reach for the sun

How do agents meet the needs of families with a neurodiverse child?  
Mark Rowe, a parent of two autistic children, offers his advice

**A**t least 1% to 1.5% of the UK population – around 700,000 adults and children – are autistic, a condition defined by the National Autistic Society as ‘a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world’.

Autism comes under the overarching umbrella of neurodiversity, which also includes ADHD, where people can have trouble concentrating and seem restless or impulsive. Further neurodiverse conditions include dyslexia and dyspraxia (affecting physical coordination). Around 14% of people may be neurodivergent.

Neurodiverse people can find social interaction and communication stressful; be oversensitive to sound, light or colour; have a love of routine; and suffer intense anxiety. Meltdowns or shutdowns may result in non-communication and non-cooperation.

I have two autistic children and the condition manifests itself in different ways: one finds the roar of aircraft engines at take-off excruciating, the other loves

flying; one is fine with crowds, the other isn't; one copes with sudden changes to itineraries, the other needs to know exactly what is happening on a given day. Some neurodiverse families breeze through a holiday, but many more find trips incredibly anxiety-provoking.

#### ASK SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

The first step a travel agent can take is to ask specifically ‘does your family have any autistic or other neurodiverse needs, such as ADHD?’ In my experience, many families do not volunteer this information, perhaps because we are so used to struggling through on a daily basis.

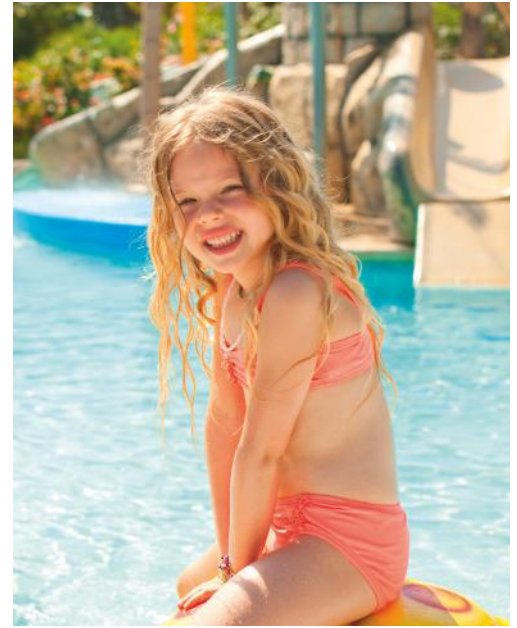
Ask clients what has worked on previous holidays. What information is needed prior to the trip and in what format? For example, photos of the locations, a map of the airport or a written schedule of the trip? Are there specific services within hotels, airports or attractions that will help, such as visual symbols or sign language? Do bright lights, loud noises and crowds need to be avoided? Ask families to detail all needs on a form. ➤





## top tip

The National Autistic Society provides a short fact sheet for travel professionals on its website. [autism.org.uk](https://autism.org.uk)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Art session with Sesame Street character Julia at Beaches Turks & Caicos; Pirates Island Waterpark, Beaches Ocho Rios; family road trip; mother and daughter yoga

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### THE RIGHT HOTEL

'Family-friendly' hotels are often noisy, while more-appropriate hotels may be either adult-only or have pools that are not child-friendly. Ask if families require bedrooms away from busy areas or night-time entertainment, or quieter dining times. Ask if they are OK with kids' clubs at resorts (the socialising element can make these a no-no) and advise on alternatives, perhaps minigolf or parent-and-child yoga. Would a 360-degree hotel tour be helpful? Ask about specific food needs, not just dietary: will a chef's ego be dented if they are asked to rustle up pasta and plain cheese with separate – not touching – tomato sauce?

### SENSORY-GENTLE ATTRACTIONS

Agents can also ask if children have any special interests. Increasingly, zoos, museums and theme parks give advice on sensory issues, so ask if 'sensory-gentle' opening times, outside mainstream visiting hours, are helpful. Check whether venues or transport operators have accreditation from the National Autistic Society's Autism Friendly Award scheme.

### AUTISM-FRIENDLY CRUISES

The cruise sector has taken some positive steps and families can book sailings that operate in conjunction with Autism on the Seas, where measures include specially trained onboard staff, priority check-in and provision for dietary needs.

Participating lines include Royal Caribbean International, NCL, Celebrity Cruises, Carnival Cruise Line and Disney Cruise Line.

### GETTING THERE

As for the journey, agents can let their clients know that the Aviation Passenger Charter also covers the rights of autistic people and those with other non-visible disabilities. Ensure families are aware of the sunflower 'hidden disability' lanyard scheme. This helps at airports where many (though most definitely not all) security staff are familiar with it and means metal detectors and scanners are as light touch as possible. Gatwick is

considered to set the standard for this, while other airports are following suit. Dubai offers special assistance; JFK in New York, Changi in Singapore and Sydney airport also recognise the scheme.

Queueing can make anxiety worse, so agents can recommend fast-track security to minimise anxiety. It's also not widely known that neurodiverse families are entitled to be among those called forward to board aircraft first.

Unless you have direct experience of neurodiversity, it can be hard to understand the ways such conditions impact families – but they will greatly appreciate any steps that agents take to make sure their travels go smoothly. **TW**

## SAMPLE PACKAGES

🌟 **Beaches Ocho Rios**, Jamaica, is running an Autism All-Inclusive Week from October 9-13, with arts and crafts, sunrise yoga, a scavenger hunt and sessions with Julia, a *Sesame Street* character on the autistic spectrum. A seven-night stay for a family of four during the week costs from £1,989 per adult and £875 per child under 12, including transfers and flights with Virgin Atlantic, departing Heathrow on October 6. To secure a place for clients, book a holiday on the above dates and pre-register families at [beaches.co.uk/special-events/autismallinclusive](https://beaches.co.uk/special-events/autismallinclusive)

🌟 **Royal Caribbean** operates several autism-supporting cruises each year. A nine-night Spain and Portugal cruise costs £1,309, departing Southampton on August 4. For a schedule of Royal Caribbean cruises that operate with the Autism on the Seas initiative, visit [autismontheseas.com/royalcaribbean](https://autismontheseas.com/royalcaribbean)

🌟 **Tui** has an assisted and specialist travel team with a dedicated phonenumber to support clients once they have booked, advising on the likes of aircraft layouts, seat allocation and transfers. Tui also offers pre-boarding support at regional airports and can advise on hotels and resorts. [tui.co.uk/destinations/info/assisted-travel-with-TUI](https://tui.co.uk/destinations/info/assisted-travel-with-TUI)