

Navigating travel and transport



Transport connects us to opportunities like work, education and social activities. For some Autistic people, navigating transport may be challenging at times. But with planning and the right tools, travel can become easier, more predictable and enjoyable – for both Autistic individuals and their support network.

**Our purpose
a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging
and celebrating the strengths,
interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.

Challenges of public transport

Public transport can be overwhelming for some Autistic people due to:

- **Sensory overload:** Bright lights, loud noises, strong smells or crowded spaces.
- **Unexpected events:** Sudden noises, temperature changes or physical contact.
- **Complexity:** Understanding maps, schedules or routes
- **Social stress:** Interacting with staff and passengers, asking for help or managing unexpected encounters.
- **Unpredictability:** Delays, route changes or crowded vehicles

These challenges may affect Autistic adults travelling independently or families/carers supporting an Autistic person during their journey

Practical tips for different modes of transport

Before your journey: plan ahead

General planning

- Use apps like Google Maps to check real-time updates, schedules and identify less busy travel times.
- Plan routes with fewer transfers to reduce complexity.
- Practise new routes or locations at quieter times with a companion. For families and carers, consider taking a practice journey with them to build familiarity.

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Before your journey: plan ahead

Special considerations for air travel

- Check the website of each airport you will visit and search for information on “hidden disability” or “Sunflower” to learn about available resources and support services e.g. an airport-specific visual story.
- Notify airlines about your needs, such as early boarding or seating preferences, during booking or check-in.
- Consider a “practice run” at the airport to familiarise yourself and your family with the various areas such as check-in, security, food areas and boarding gates.

Think about what to bring to help manage sensory and comfort needs

- Noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs to reduce overwhelming sounds
- Sunglasses or tinted glasses and/or hat to help with bright lights or visual sensitivity
- Snacks and water to stay nourished and hydrated during the journey
- A fidget tool or sensory item for calming and focus.

During the journey: stay comfortable

On buses and trains

- Choose a quiet spot, such as near a window or exit, if possible.
- Use a GPS app to track your location and feel more in control.
- Wear noise-cancelling headphones or listen to calming music.
- Carry communication cards, an [Autism Alert Card](#) or use an app to ask for help, if needed.
- Practise grounding techniques, like deep breathing or holding a comforting object, to manage stress.
- If overwhelmed, consider getting off at a quiet stop to regroup and continue later.

At airports and on flights

- Look for sensory-friendly spaces, such as quiet rooms.
- Keep sensory tools, snacks and calming items in your carry-on for easy access.
- Inform flight attendants about any specific needs you or your child may have during the flight, such as assistance with meals or managing unexpected events.

After the journey: reflect and recharge

On buses and trains

- Give yourself time to relax and decompress after travelling.

- Think about what worked well and any difficulties you faced.
- Celebrate your progress, no matter how small.
- Talk with family, friends or professionals to adjust your strategies for future journeys.



Tools to support your travel

Aspect Autism Alert Card

This free card helps explain your needs in challenging situations. It’s designed by Autistic people and comes in two versions:

- Folded card: Includes space for your name, emergency contact and tips for others.
- Plastic card: Includes the same features as the folded card plus a QR code linking to more autism information.

You can order your free card on [Aspect’s website](#).

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Lanyard

The Sunflower Lanyard shows that you have a hidden disability and might need support.

- Many staff at participating organisations (e.g. Australian airports and transport hubs) are trained to recognise and assist.
- Pairing it with the Aspect Autism Alert Card can further clarify your needs.
- Participating organisations often provide lanyards for free, or they can be purchased online.

Useful Resources

Web

The Conversation: theconversation.com/airports-and-travel-hubs-can-be-overwhelming-for-autistic-people-heres-what-could-help-243032

Autism Awareness Australia: autismawareness.com.au/update/travel-and-transport-on-the-autism-spectrum

Altogether Autism: altogetherautism.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Autism-friendly-tips-for-public-transport-A3.pdf

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/transport/travelling-by-train-or-bus

Australian Government Disability Gateway: disabilitygateway.gov.au/transport