



GUIDELINES FOR AIRLINE STAFF CONCERNING FLIGHT PASSENGERS WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

I have been contacted by _____, the parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder. As the family have chosen to fly on your airline, I would like to briefly explain the main characteristics evident in autism, and suggest good practice guidelines to help the staff on board provide the best possible service to these particular passengers.

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are caused by biological brain dysfunction. When someone has a diagnosis of ASD they will have impairments in three main areas:-

1. Problems with **Communication** – this may include concrete understanding of language and formal, monologue type use of speech. There is usually a distinct difficulty in interpreting non-verbal forms of communication.
2. Problems with **Social interaction** – there may be a difficulty in relating on a social level to others, as well as an inability to read the thoughts and feelings of others; forming relationships is a problem area.
3. Problems with **Imagination** – may display rigid and inflexible ways of thinking; a reliance on obsessions and stereotyped behaviours combined with a resistance to change.

Some people on the spectrum also experience poor motor co-ordination which may appear as a physical clumsiness.

Unusual reactions to pain, no sense of danger and hyper sensitivity to certain stimuli, are often associated with the autism spectrum.

So how may the autism affect the way the passenger responds to the flight? What may happen?

A common feature displayed by individuals on the autism spectrum, is a fear of change. Because of the confusion that can accompany a social communication disorder, the person may show a strong preference for behaving in a certain, sometimes stereotyped manner. When faced with an unfamiliar situation such as a first flight, the person may use a particular coping strategy, which may appear unusual to other people present. The coping strategy will vary widely from person to person and may be a verbal response – where the young person relies upon the repetition of certain phrases/noises; or a physical response – where the person may engage in repetitive actions (wringing hands, tapping feet, rocking the body, grimacing etc.). Sometimes the response

may appear aggressive or self injurious (e.g. the person may ask something over and over again in an insistent and unrelenting manner, bite their hand etc.) – but it is essential to understand this behaviour within its proper context. This passenger is displaying their anxiety, and has no intention of intimidating other passengers or causing trouble, they are merely responding to the uncertain, frightening environment. If a situation does occur where the passenger becomes distressed, the parents travelling alongside the person are in the best position to calm and reassure them. The parents are essentially the experts, as they are familiar with the reactions of the person and understand the best way of tackling any distress that arises. An unfamiliar member of staff trying to assert authority in this situation is likely to increase the stress levels of the passenger, and as a consequence the behaviour may become more pronounced.

Ways of assisting passengers on the autism spectrum.

It will depend on each individual as to what assistance they need, however below are some brief guidelines:

- Allow the passenger to board the plane before other passengers to avoid the busy queue.
- Or allow them to board when everyone else is settled.
- Allocate the passenger a seat away from busy areas (eg. the toilet).
- Allocate the person a window seat to avoid them being knocked etc as other passengers pass.
- Be prepared to provide special meals as a gluten and casein free diet is sometimes followed.
- If the passenger is travelling alone someone may need to assist them after check in/before check out in areas where carers without tickets will not be allowed.

Communicating with passengers on the autism spectrum.

- The staff should be aware of the language they use with the passenger. Sentences should be brief. Language needs to be simple, clear and concise.
- Provide adequate information in advance. The passenger may need longer to process information.
- A calm voice tone is important. Whatever the situation try to keep the pitch steady and low.
- Avoid sarcasm, metaphors or speech that has to be ‘read into’. Some people on the autism spectrum take language very literally, so misunderstandings can occur if language open to interpretation is used.
- Open-ended questions can be very hard for some people on the spectrum to answer. Too much choice can sometimes be overwhelming. By providing clear alternatives, you can make this much easier for the person (for instance “Would you like coffee, or tea?”, is better than “What would you like to drink?”).

- Where possible, try to back up verbally presented information with any available written/visual material.

I have tried to provide a basic overview in this letter, which I hope is useful. If the parents/carer bring more specific notes, relating to the individual, some of the information given here may be overridden. More information about autism spectrum disorders can requested from the National Autistic Society.

Yours sincerely

Autism Helpline