

Tips for Dining Out with Kids with Autism

One of the biggest challenges for families with an autistic child is going out for dinner at a restaurant. Some kids are thrown off by changes in their routine, others can be disturbed by noisy crowds, and some simply do not like to wait. So, many parents choose to forego restaurants, including on their family vacation. However, experts say that there are strategies that parents of autistic children can employ to making dining out a more enjoyable experience.

Avoiding Long Restaurant Waits

Dr. Nathan Call, director of the Marcus Autism Center's Behavior Treatment Clinic in Atlanta, Ga., says one of the most difficult situations for some children with autism is understanding delays and having to wait-an extra challenge in a busy restaurant. If you face a long wait, Call suggests breaking the time into smaller chunks that can be more easily managed by your child. For example, you might tell your child you will be waiting for 15 minutes. When that time is up, walk outside for a couple of minutes, then return to the restaurant. Visual cues like setting a timer also help focus the child's attention away from the wait.

"Just make sure that you have control of the time," Call says, adding that it is also important to have a good idea of how long a delay you really face. "If the wait takes longer than you expected, you could put yourself in a hole."

Planning Ahead

Claire Dees, the president of Spectrum, an autism support group near Atlanta, Ga., says she has experienced problems eating out with her 20-year-old autistic son, Blake. "When we travel, we often have pizza delivered, or we get takeout and bring it back to the room."

But when closer to home, Dees ventures into restaurants more. Good planning is key. Dees says it helps to do research on a new restaurant.

- Look for restaurants with patios so you can sit outside. "It is typically not as crowded outside and there is a little more space," says Dees.
- Make sure a new restaurant can accommodate a diet for autistic children, since many autistic children also have restricted diets (Dees' son is on a gluten-free diet and needs special foods, so she carries snacks and drinks for him.)
- Use visual schedules, social stories or simply talks about what the restaurant experience will be like. "It helps to prepare your child for what's next," says Dees.

- If you plan to dine out with an autistic child for a special occasion, Call suggests the family practice going out to eat ahead of time. “Don’t wait until your anniversary dinner or a birthday to eat out and just see how it goes,” he says. “That’s not the time to figure it out.”
- Set aside some time every couple of weeks to eat out, adds Call. “Then if it doesn’t go well, that’s OK. Go in knowing that you might not get fed today, and keep practicing.”

In-Restaurant Tips

- Go to the restaurant at 4 pm, when it’s not as crowded.
- Visit Mexican or Italian restaurants - “places where they put chips or bread on the table right away,” Call says, so your child is not waiting for food.
- Give the waiter your credit card up front and tell him you may have to leave quickly.
- While waiting for a table or for food, distract your child with a toy, music or handheld video games - anything that normally keeps his or her attention occupied.
- When things do go well, leave on a good note: Head home right away and don’t press your luck by staying too long.

Educating Others on Autism

Eating away from home means more than restaurant dining. Dees advises parents to remind family members and friends about any special dietary issues before you visit. “You need to be considerate when you’re traveling to people’s homes,” she adds.

Dees also suggests being prepared to educate others about autism when dining out or just being away from home in general. “I used to carry those little cards from the Autism Society of America that explains what autism is,” she says. When there is a problem, people get curious or want to help, she continues. “I don’t hesitate to explain to people [that my son is] OK, but sometimes it is easier to hand out a card.”

Call notes that it can be challenging to deal with other people who are not as understanding about autism, and trying to manage their expectations. “If you’re going to visit other people, let them know what to expect,” he adds. “It’s tough to just show up somewhere and expect everything to go great. It’s better to be prepared and to prepare others for what might occur.”

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