Flying with a special-needs child: a calm plan for the hard moments

Security lines, loud airports, medical gear and wheelchairs, and the long stretch in the seat. What official pages say, plus a few ideas of ours. Checked November 17, 2026.

Do this first, at least 72 hours before you fly: contact **TSA Cares** at **(855) 787-2227** (weekdays 8 a.m.–11 p.m. ET, weekends and holidays 9 a.m.–8 p.m. ET) or its online form, and ask for a **Passenger Support Specialist**, a specially trained TSA officer. Traveling with a child who has a disability or medical condition is one reason TSA lists. It doesn't skip screening and isn't an express lane.

1 Security lines

- **Tell the officer your way:** out loud, with medical documentation, or with TSA's printable **Notification Card**. A companion can do the talking. The card also says alternate screening **can be done in private**, and if no specialist is there you may ask for a Supervisory TSA Officer.
- Children who appear 12 or younger get modified screening, and officers consult you. You may **carry your child** through the metal detector.
- Officers **won't remove your child** from a wheelchair or other mobility aid. Children with non-visible disabilities, such as autism, can be screened **without being separated** from you.
- **OUR IDEA** Rehearse the steps at home: shoes off, bags on the belt, the beep.

2 Sensory overload and meltdowns

- **Find the quiet space.** Some airports have sensory rooms, such as Seattle-Tacoma (call (206) 787-5229, press 1 for the code) and Pittsburgh (Presley's Place, Concourse A). Check your airport's accessibility page.
- The **Hidden Disabilities Sunflower** lanyard signals a non-visible disability, but doesn't entitle you to any specific accommodation. Still ask.
- **Rehearse.** The Arc's **Wings for All** events practice check-in, the checkpoint and boarding a plane that doesn't take off.
- **Ask to preboard.** Tell the gate agent you need extra time; U.S. airlines must offer it.
- **OUR IDEA** Headphones, a comfort item, a picture schedule of the day and a "break" signal.

3 Medical equipment and wheelchairs

- **Medical liquids** over 3.4 oz are allowed in reasonable amounts. Declare them at the start; put them in a bin with ice packs, pumps and syringes. You can ask that they not be X-rayed or opened.
- Devices attached to the body needn't be removed. Tell the officer where they are.
- **Gate-checked wheelchairs** get **priority stowage** and must come back **as close to the aircraft door as possible** (unless you ask for baggage claim). Airlines must tell you before the door closes whether yours was loaded. You may give **written directions** for taking it apart and reassembling it.
- Airlines may ask for **48 hours' notice** to use a ventilator, CPAP or portable oxygen concentrator on board.
- **Problem?** Ask for the airline's **Complaints Resolution Official**, available at each airport in person or by phone. Wheelchair help comes from your airline, not TSA.

4 The long stretch in the seat

- **Seat help:** on request, airlines must give a personal care attendant the seat next to you if they'll do things the crew isn't required to do, such as help with eating.
- **Special-needs car seat:** U.S. airlines must allow a child under 18 to use an approved, labeled restraint that fits their weight.
- **OUR IDEAS** Burn energy before boarding: walk, stretch, jump. Keep downloaded shows, fidgets and snacks at your feet. An aisle seat makes movement breaks easier; take one whenever the seat belt sign is off.
- **OUR IDEA** Tell the flight attendant at the door what helps and what to avoid.

More free help from SafelyAboard

- **All our special-needs flying guides**: safelyaboard.com/learn/flying-with-special-needs-kids
- Free **Calm Flight Checklist** (safelyaboard.com/holidays) and a free **5-day email course** (safelyaboard.com/holiday-calm-plan)
- For a nervous parent: Days 1–2 of the **7-day program** are free.

Show staff in one glance

What helps:

What to avoid:

Equipment:

Sources: TSA (Cares passenger support, Disabilities and Medical Conditions, Traveling with Children, Notification Card); 14 CFR Part 382, §§382.27, 382.81, 382.93, 382.123, 382.125, 382.129, 382.151 (ecfr.gov); FAA Flying with Special Needs; Port of Seattle and Pittsburgh International Airport sensory room pages; hdsunflower.com; The Arc (Wings for Autism / Wings for All). Rules and numbers change: confirm with your airline and airport.

Free to share in your episode and show notes. General planning information, not medical advice; SafelyAboard is not a clinician or therapist.