

Cruising with Special Needs - Part 1: Autism: A Disney Cruise Line Planning Article

by Carol Yeh, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Traveling can be stressful; traveling when you have special needs doubles that stress.

Although disabilities (especially autism) vary significantly by individual, I wanted to share some of my family's experiences. I hope this article helps other special needs travelers plan their Disney cruise and alleviates some of the stress that comes with planning a vacation.

In April 2015, my family enjoyed a 7-night Western Caribbean cruise on the Disney Magic with my parents. It was my family's first cruise ever and my parents' first with Disney Cruise Line (DCL). Our party had a wheelchair user (my mother) and a child with autism (my son).

□ This article focuses on my 6-year old son, Joey, who has high functioning autism. (A separate article, "Disney Cruising With a Wheelchair," focuses on my mother's experience.) Because autism looks different in each person, I want to first explain Joey's behaviors before sharing our story. He has trouble with loud noises, changes or surprises, and understanding social cues such as facial expressions and body language. "First times" are very difficult for Joey, so the entire cruise was a big, scary concept for him. However, with patience and familiar tools, like visual schedules, we were able to help Joey make sense of the cruise and enjoy the trip.

□ Preparing for our trip

□ The biggest help for our family was setting realistic expectations. On previous vacations, Joey preferred staying in our hotel rooms instead of exploring landmarks and attractions. So, going into our cruise, we knew he would want to spend most of his time in the stateroom. Luckily, my husband didn't mind staying in while I took our 10-year old daughter to enjoy the onboard activities. It worked well because we didn't have to shortchange one child's fun for the other's. Plus my husband and I got to vacation the way we prefer: he prefers relaxing while I like to see "what's doing."

Before our trip, I called Disney to document Joey's issues. Because the guest record has a character limit, it helps to summarize the issues and preferred accommodations; for example, "He doesn't like loud noises," or "He responds to visual cues, not spoken." Although I appreciated

Disney's acknowledging Joey's special needs, I must admit that on board, I wasn't sure which crew members knew about Joey's autism or if they even knew at all! For future cruises, I will still call ahead to document his needs, but now I know I will also need to proactively share information with crew members, especially our dining team.

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□ Embarkation Day

□ Had I read my boarding papers more closely, I would have known staterooms are not ready until 1:30 p.m. As it was, we boarded around 12:45 p.m., which meant wandering the ship for 45 minutes. Joey was able to expend some of his nervous energy at the Oceaneer Club, but he really needed a quiet place to settle down. For our next trip, we will select a later port arrival time, so we can access our stateroom immediately and give Joey a much needed respite from the crowds and chaos.

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□ The muster drill can be challenging for autistics, because it combines several triggers: waiting, crowds, heat, and loud noises. For our family, the hardest part was standing and waiting, which we inadvertently made harder by arriving 10 minutes early for the drill. (Lesson learned: Two minutes early is good enough!) We stood close to other guests, lining up single file as a family from tallest to shortest. (I traded places with our daughter so I could stand with Joey, and no one bothered me about that.) Because the muster drill happens while still in port, it can become quite warm; there are no cooling breezes for this part of the cruise! Luckily, the announcements during the muster drill included a warning before the sirens sounded, so we knew the blasts were coming and could cover Joey's ears.

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□ At the Oceaneer Club

□ During Open House at the Oceaneer Club and Lab, we explained Joey's needs to crew members, and they added notes to his record in their system. Children wear a waterproof bracelet for the entire cruise to enter and exit the Oceaneer Club and Lab. If your child is unable to wear the bracelet, staff can attach it to clothing (such as belt loops or shoe laces) and remove it after each visit. Joey received a red clasp on his band, an indicator that the child has either special needs or a food allergy. Kids without issues receive a black clasp.

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□ Before entering the Oceaneer Club and Lab, children must use special hand washers. Kids insert their hands into a cubby hole outfitted with sprayers that gently wash the hands for about 30 seconds. Joey tolerated the machine well, especially after watching other children use it. If your child has tactile issues, you may want to ask crew members for an alternative.

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□ On Board Activities

□ Because Joey does not like loud noises, we opted to skip most onboard activities for him. Many of the kid- and family-friendly events featured loud music with crew members encouraging the audience to clap and cheer. Favorite activities, such as the Character Dance Party and Pirate Night, definitely create a fun, energetic atmosphere, but they can be overwhelming for some people with autism. (Regarding Pirate Night, if your loved one is easily over-stimulated, you may want to talk to your servers to see what accommodations are possible or just plan to eat elsewhere that night. The dinner show is quite loud and boisterous.)

□ The evening stage shows regularly featured loud, sudden noises (like firecrackers popping), sparks and bright flashes on stage, and actors running full speed up and down the aisles. The theater's sound system was also turned up, so the overall volume during the shows can be quite high. If your loved one does not like loud noises or surprises, you may want to talk to crew members about which shows are calmer and which ones to avoid.

□ Dining Service

□ We ate dinner at our assigned restaurant each night, so we could enjoy family time with my parents. Disney does a great job with serving the kids' meals quickly, and they provide some crayons with activity-filled kids menus. Most nights, however, Joey was unable to sit all the way to the end of dinner service. My husband usually ate his meal quickly and then took both kids for walks around the ship. One night, Joey couldn't make it through the main course. Our servers quickly offered to deliver my husband's meal directly to the stateroom…plus they sent along a plateful of cookies for dessert! If you need to leave dinner early, your servers can send meals to your stateroom -- just make sure someone is there to receive them. (The dining room staff cannot enter staterooms.)

□ Final thoughts

□ Because this was our first cruise, we weren't sure what to expect. We used visual schedules and watched YouTube videos with Joey to explain as much of our trip as possible. Once on board, we slowed down and gave him extra time to get used to the ship and all its sights and sounds. Although we encouraged him to try new activities, we followed his lead on when he'd had enough. In the end, Joey had a fantastic time -- he's drawn hundreds of pictures of the Magic since returning home -- and I know he is dreaming of going back!

About The Author: Carol Yeh is a part-time freelance editor and writer in Virginia. She loves dreaming and planning Disney vacations for her family.

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