

Car Trips

Introduction

Car rides allow you a lot of flexibility in terms of how far you go, and how long you travel at a stretch. However, many families of children with autism find car rides challenging. Successful car rides and road trips require your child to understand car safety, and also feel comfortable traveling for longer periods. Before we talk about road trips, let's take a look at car safety, which is important even if you are just making a short trip.

Car Safety

Teach your child to enter and exit a car safely by having them hold hands with you or walk right beside you in a parking lot. You can role play this skill across all environments. Tell them to stay with you as you walk around the park towards their favorite playground equipment. As you approach the swings or slide, say "Wow! Good job staying next to me, let's go swing!" This skill of staying next to you can be built up from shorter amounts of time or shorter distances, to longer amounts of time or longer distances. By working on this skill in different environments, walking with your child in a parking lot should be just as easy! You can also practice opening and closing doors safely, and point out areas where their fingers could get stuck.

You should show your child what to look out for in a parking lot, such as cars that are reversing or pulling into a parking spot. Practice crossing a parking lot and stopping for moving cars. You can also work on this skill at home by playing an "identify the moving cars" game. Sit or stand with your child where you can observe moving cars. A front porch, yard or even a window that faces the street is a great place to begin. Ask your child, "Look! Is the car moving?" or "Is the car coming?" If your child can identify moving cars correctly, praise them for getting the answer right.

Teach a child how to use a seatbelt and let them get comfortable with it. Some children with autism may have certain sensory needs when it comes to the physical feeling of something across their chest, so if needed, add a padded part to their seatbelt or teach them to inform you when it's too tight. Let them practice buckling and unbuckling a seatbelt if they are old enough. For smaller children, make sure they are NOT able to undo the seatbelt during a ride. Also ensure that car seats are installed correctly, and that the seatbelts are tight enough to prevent your child from removing their arms or legs. If you have multiple children you are traveling with, and one of them needs to be in a stroller, set up the stroller first, then remove the younger child who needs to be in the stroller, and finally remove the child who will be walking, to avoid accidents. Do the reverse when you are getting back into your car.

Road Trips

Every child will have a different threshold for the amount of time they can spend in a car at a stretch, so it may require some trial and error before you are able to get through a longer road trip comfortably.

Prepare Your Child – Talk to your child about what to expect during a road trip. Explain that the trip will take longer than a usual car trip, and let them know what you expect in terms of desirable behaviors. You can use a Social Story to talk about a road trip, or show them pictures of where you are going and talk about what they can look forward to seeing when they get there.

Plan Your Breaks – It is helpful to know your travel route and plan areas where you will stop for lunch or breaks. If your child is very uncomfortable sitting for long periods, you can plan to stop at a local park to allow them time to move and play. You may also want to break your journey up over a couple of days if you do not believe your child will be able to sit through the ride comfortably.

You can keep a special toy or activity that your child likes for the car. This can be used as a positive reinforcer for when they are able to remain calm and follow directions while taking trips. If your child likes certain types of puzzles, stress reduction balls, Sudoku or other games, you can keep these in the car for entertainment. Rotate special toys or preferred items every few months to make sure the value of what you have in the car stays strong. iPads, electronic hand-held games, and audio books are also great distractors for kids.

Offer lots of praise and encouragement. Reinforce positive behavior with stickers, treats or other desirable objects to make rides more enjoyable.

Be prepared for interruptions – Take plenty of snacks and water in case you unexpectedly get stuck in traffic, or get a flat tire. Snacks can keep a hungry child from having a meltdown as they wait to get to a restaurant.

Pack thoughtfully – Keep everything you will need frequently within easy reach. This will keep you from having to stop to pull things out of a suitcase or the trunk of the car.

Conclusion

We hope you have found these tips useful. Road trips can be tricky, as you figure out how long a trip your child can endure comfortably. It is best to start with shorter road trips, as children can get restless even if they are only in the car for 1.5 to 2 hours. You can find additional resources on our website, www.porchlighteducation.org.