Travel Notes & Must-Know Tips for Stress-Free Family Flights

As I prepare for my first flight with the boys, I've been gathering as much information as possible to make traveling easier for families like ours. These are my personal notes on how to navigate airports, avoid extra fees, and take advantage of travel perks designed for families with disabled children. I hope these tips help make your next trip a little smoother.

Avoiding Seat Selection Fees

Many airlines charge extra to select seats ahead of time, but you can often request accommodations so your family can sit together at no extra cost.

1. Use the DPNA Code (Disabled Passenger with Intellectual or Developmental Disability Needing Assistance) when booking your flight to alert the airline that you need accommodations.

2. Call the airline after booking and request that seat fees be waived due to medical necessity.

3. Mention that your child requires a caregiver next to them for safety and support.

4. Airlines that are known to accommodate DPNA requests:

- American Airlines:
https://www.aa.com/i18n/travel-info/special-assistance/special-assistance.jsp

- United Airlines:
https://www.united.com/en/us/fly/travel/special-needs/disabilities/seating-accomodations.html

- Delta Air Lines:
https://pro.delta.com/content/agency/us/en/products-and-services/special-services/travelers-with-disabilities.html

TSA Cares – Stress-Free Airport Security

TSA Cares is a free program that helps families with disabled travelers get through airport security with extra support and accommodations.

1. Call TSA Cares at 1-855-787-2227 at least 72 hours before your flight to request assistance.

2. TSA will assign an agent to meet you at security and help you through the process.

3. This is great for children who struggle with waiting in long lines, being separated from parents, or sensory overload.

4. You can also fill out a TSA Cares request online:
https://www.tsa.gov/travel/passenger-support

Extra Travel Tips & Reminders

1. Pack familiar snacks and comfort items. Traveling can be overstimulating, so bring comfort foods, fidget toys, and a weighted blanket if needed.

2. Request pre-boarding. Many airlines allow families with disabilities to board early to get settled.

3. Bring noise-canceling headphones. Airports and airplanes can be loud and overwhelming.

4. Practice with short outings. If your child has never been to an airport, visit one beforehand to get them familiar with the environment.

5. Download favorite shows and games. Keeping your child engaged during travel can make the experience much smoother.

6. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Gate agents, flight attendants, and TSA staff are trained to assist travelers with disabilities.

A Reminder for Us Special Needs Parents

I know how scary it can be to travel with our children—whether by car, train, or airplane. We want to keep everyone safe and happy, and we don't want to inconvenience other travelers either. But our kids deserve to see the world and experience new places. They deserve vacations, new memories, and the same joy that any other child would have while exploring new destinations.

That's why I'm telling myself—I have to let go of the fear and just go for it. It won't be perfect, but it will be worth it. If you're on the fence about traveling, know that you are not alone and that with the right preparation, it is absolutely possible.

Travel Looks Different for Us – And That's Okay

I know that spring and summer break look different for us. Many of our kids have Extended School Year (ESY), which can limit when we can travel. It can feel like there's never a 'right time' to take a trip.

But if we find a window—even for a short family vacation—it can still be just as fun and memorable. It doesn't have to be a week-long trip to be special. A few days in a new place, a road trip, or even a quick getaway can create lifelong memories for our families.

Things may look different for us, but different doesn't mean less. In fact, sometimes different is even more beautiful.

Final Reminder to Myself (and You!)

I know this can feel overwhelming, but this is going to be an amazing experience for me and the boys. We deserve to travel, explore, and create beautiful memories just like any other family. Things may not go perfectly, and that's okay. Take a deep breath, plan ahead, and trust that you've got this. It's about progress, not perfection. Let's make this trip happen!