



ONASSIS
SPECIAL
EDUCATION



Flying with autism





The experience of taking a flight may not be the same for everyone, but it's an experience everybody should be able to have.

How would it feel if a passenger processed all the symbols and the sensory triggers in an airport using their emotions rather than their logic? How difficult would it be if all the signs and information were “interpreted” into intense feelings like fear? How would they react?

You might not be as far away from a passenger like that as you think. It could even be the young person sitting beside you on a plane. **Your co-passenger could be a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).**

For most of us, flying is a routine experience. For others, however, and especially for youngsters with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their carers, having to deal with the many procedures involved from check-in to fastening your seatbelt and take-off can be extremely stressful.

If we are to understand a co-passenger with ASD, we need to equip ourselves with all the available information.

If we don't know what autism means, we cannot empathize with the difficulties these children and their carers face.

Why isn't a flight the same for everyone?



If, however, we take on board the scientific findings required to understand their specific needs and challenges, we may be able to help travellers with ASD adjust smoothly to the demands of a plane journey. Of course, we will be enriching ourselves at the same time.

In this leaflet, you will find **information about autism** and the **autism-related obstacles** a child with this condition may face, especially in an airport environment. But you will also find out what you can do to make the experience of airports and airplanes easier for children on the autism spectrum.

While every passenger may enjoy the right to fly, that does not mean that everyone deals with flights—or expresses their fears, anxieties and expectations about flying—in the same way. The **Onassis Foundation's** “Boarding Pass to Autism” initiative, which is being run in collaboration with **Athens International Airport** and the **National and Kapodistrian University of Athens**, sets out both to help these children release their potential and to raise awareness of autism more generally.

This leaflet is one of the educational materials produced for the “Boarding Pass to Autism” program, which aims both to help children with Autism Spectrum Disorder familiarize themselves with the procedures of air travel and to raise awareness of these children's special needs and profile as air travellers among fellow passengers, therapists and parents. The educational program is an Onassis Foundation initiative staged in collaboration with Athens International Airport under the academic auspices of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, with the support of AEGEAN airlines. For more information on the “Boarding Pass to Autism” Special Education program, please visit www.onassis.org.

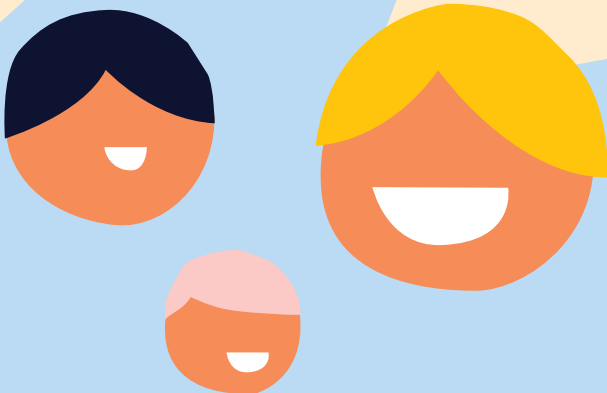


“I hear the flowers, I see the wind”

This is how one adolescent with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) described the world in which he lives—a world he is now “inviting” his fellow passengers to explore with him.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is an umbrella diagnosis for individuals who can be very different from one another. Some may be highly intelligent but face social and emotional difficulties. Others may display problems in behaviour, learning, communication and language use and may find it hard to adjust to social conventions, process sensory information and manage their anxiety.

While it is possible to spot specific ASD characteristics in some people immediately, this is not always the case. Even when such characteristics are not obvious to outside observers, they still **pose a significant burden on the person experiencing them**. When the difficulties escalate and the environment is not enabling for individuals with ASD, they may manifest **extreme reactions** including anger outbursts and self-harm.




1 in 68

The diagnosis of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder has risen **at an epidemic rate** in recent years. We do not know what lies behind the increase, but it is estimated that **1 in 68** people in the general population are currently diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum.

Fortunately, a number of children with ASD have responded extremely positively to timely and intensive interventions by appropriately trained specialists. However, the majority of these children will still require support – some even continued support into adulthood – through all the stages of their development.

Lastly, it's worth remembering that one of the core factors leading to compromised development in children with ASD is their genetic inheritance (severe organic impairment). A lack of adequate educational and therapeutic services for children with a disorder as serious as autism can only make this burden heavier still.



Our senses play a vital role in how we perceive and learn about our surroundings. In turn, our perceptions impact on our emotions, our behaviour and the way we communicate with others.

Many individuals with ASD experience sensory sensitivities **in one or all of their senses** (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, balance, body awareness). An individual with ASD may, for example, be under-sensitive and/or over-sensitive to stimuli at different times resulting in distress, anxiety and even physical pain.

At the airport

With its multitude of simultaneous sensory stimuli (bright lights, people rushing around, announcements etc.), an airport can be a particularly complex and demanding environment for a person with ASD. If they have not been adequately prepared for an environment of this sort, a person with ASD may become anxious and insecure as they strive to avoid aggravations by remaining in a state of constant hyper-vigilance. It is likely that their behaviour will become unsettled.

The inability to communicate their needs or to decipher what is happening around them can also be a source of intense anxiety for people with ASD. Having to participate in social situations and cope with changes in routine, unpredictability and a lack of control over what's happening around us can all stimulate anxiety – needless to say, these are all conditions frequently encountered in airports, on flights and journeys, and in unfamiliar destinations.

What does
a flight feel like
for someone
with ASD?



Anxiety symptoms

Anxiety goes hand in hand with **physical symptoms** (such as sweating, stomach cramps and heart palpitations) which are associated with negative thoughts (“What will happen if they open my suitcase?”, “What will the body search be like?”). Since many individuals with ASD are unable to communicate their anxiety verbally, their stress will manifest itself through their behaviour (e.g. in an anger outburst). It is therefore important for us to be understanding and to help individuals with ASD train themselves to manage their anxiety.



What do people with ASD find challenging?

1.

Complex concepts.
People who talk a lot
or too quickly.

6.

Understanding
metaphors and humour—
they understand
things **literally**.

2.

People who
shout or quarrel.

7.

Explaining in words
whats' bothering them
or what they need.
That's why
they can sometimes
start to shout or perform
repetitive actions.

3.

Surprises,
unexpected situations
and changes
to programs.

8.

Being pressured
into responding quickly
(they need more time
to understand what is
required of them).

4.

Understanding
others' thoughts
and feelings.

9.

Commotion, crowds,
loud noises, loudspeakers,
lights and being touched—
their senses work
differently from yours.

5. Certain **tastes** and **smells**.

What do individuals with ASD find helpful?

1.

Not being asked to maintain eye contact when they speak to you.

6.

Being told **simply and specifically** what you would like them to do.
Being shown pictures that back up what you're telling them.

2.

Being spoken to **quietly** with **simple phrases** and easy words.

7.

People showing understanding—
they cannot communicate like you.

3.

Knowing in advance **what is going to happen** and what they need to do.

8.

Patience.

4.

Being told **how you feel**, what you like and what you don't like in simple words.

9.

A quiet space.
Dim lighting.

5. Being asked **what they want to eat.**

If it helps and you can,
give up your place in the queue
or agree to change seats
on the plane.

What
to do
on a flight

If the individual with ASD is doing
something you find irritating,
tell them or their carer politely.

If you can see they are having
difficulties expressing themselves,
keep calm, **avoid persistent eye contact**
with the individual and/or their carer,
and avoid giving **advice** or making
suggestions and comments to the individual
with ASD and/or their carer.

If you want to help, **approach the
individual calmly** and from the side
of the carer, if possible. Tactfully ask
if they **need any assistance**.

Don't take any action **without
the carer's approval**.



What can I do
to help during
flight?

If you don't know what to do or how to react, ask **a member of the airport staff** for information on what to do.

Be **patient** and **supportive** in any way you can.

The parents of people with ASD are doing everything they can to help. **They are not to blame for any difficulties.** Try to be supportive and discreet.

Remember that there's a difference between "I don't want to do something" and **"I can't do something"**.

The Onassis Foundation and Special Education

The **Onassis Foundation** has now been involved in the provision of educational activities in the sphere of **Special Education** for five years; five years of trust placed in us by the parents of children who have participated in our workshops and who continue to support us with their presence.

The Onassis Foundation's ultimate goal is **to release the potential of children with disabilities** in the Athens area and other cities throughout Greece.

And while the means may change, the goal remains the same: providing access for as many children as possible to our workshops, reinforcing inclusion and developing children's abilities through cooperative practices. Both parents and children should have the right to "escape".

Which is why we continue to develop meaningful activities employing the magic of music and/or artistic expression to help **parents discover new and creative ways of communicating with their children.**

The Onassis Foundation also continues to join forces with more and more **organizations and schools involved in Special Education around Greece** which are interested in collaborating on shared initiatives. “Music loves Autism”, “Come paint music with me” and “The art of recycling” are just some of the Onassis Foundation’s educational programs. At the same time, we stage hands-on Special Education workshops for educators and others active in the field of Special Education.

However, the Onassis Foundation’s activities in the area of Special Education are not limited to educational programs. For decades now, the Onassis Foundation has been supporting special schools and integration programs with donations of books, equipment and teaching aids to help educators in their efforts. Moreover, the Scholarships programs which the Foundation has been running since 1978 includes post-graduate studies and doctoral research in the area of Special Education at universities in Greece and abroad, while it has also consistently **supported organizations like ELEPAP (Rehabilitation for the Disabled)** in their valuable but difficult work.



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