

Bridging the Gap

Making Travel Accessible for Autistic Adults

Evidence-Based Research Supporting the Need for
Centralized Resources and Peer Support Networks

**87% of autistic people find independent travel
difficult or impossible**

November 2025

Research compiled from academic sources across
Australia, Europe, United Kingdom, and United States

Executive Summary

"87% of autistic people find it difficult or impossible to use buses or trains. That's a shocking statistic."

— National Autistic Society, UK (2025)

Over 5 million autistic adults in the United States face substantial barriers to independent travel. Despite representing a significant and growing population, these adults are largely underserved by current travel industry accommodations, which predominantly focus on families with autistic children.

The Challenge

The National Autistic Society's 2025 research—with 4,052 participants—reveals that 87% of autistic people find independent travel difficult or impossible. This barrier directly impacts employment (85%+ unemployment among college-educated autistic adults), healthcare access, social participation, and quality of life.

The Industry Response

Since 2024, the travel industry has made significant progress: major airports worldwide have achieved Certified Autism Center designation, airlines have expanded autism-friendly programs, and over 3,000 travel industry professionals have received specialized training. This momentum demonstrates industry recognition of the need.

The Critical Gap

However, a fundamental disconnect remains: while infrastructure improves and certifications expand, independent autistic adults—particularly those aged 30 and older—lack three critical resources:

1. **Centralized information** about autism-friendly travel options
2. **Peer support networks** connecting experienced and novice travelers
3. **Adult-specific resources** distinct from child-focused materials

The Solution

This white paper presents comprehensive evidence documenting these gaps and demonstrates how they can be addressed through a centralized platform that connects autistic adult travelers with verified resources, experienced peers, and current information—bridging the space between industry progress and community need.

The convergence of research evidence, industry momentum, and documented community need creates an unprecedented opportunity for innovation in accessible travel through authentic, community-centered solutions.

1. The Problem: Barriers Facing Autistic Adult Travelers

Research from four continents consistently identifies three primary barriers that make travel difficult or impossible for 87% of autistic people:

1.1 Sensory Overload

- 87% experience sensory discomfort or overload on public transport
- Overwhelming noise, crowds, lights, and smells in travel environments
- Multiple simultaneous sensory inputs creating cognitive overload
- Prolonged exposure can lead to cardiovascular stress and autistic burnout

1.2 Unpredictability and Uncertainty

- 85% are stressed by unexpected delays and cancellations
- 71% experience anxiety about travel before the journey even starts
- Lack of advance information about environments and procedures
- Ambiguous signage and wayfinding systems

1.3 Social and Communication Barriers

- 86% are concerned about strangers being close or seated beside them
- 81% feel anxious or unsafe outside home or in public spaces
- Misinterpretation of autistic behaviors by security personnel and staff
- Difficulty asking for help or self-advocating in stressful situations
- Lack of recognition of autism by service providers

Key Insight: These barriers are not theoretical. They have real-world consequences: 40%+ of autistic adults lack access to transportation, 85%+ of college-educated autistic adults are unemployed, and transportation barriers are consistently identified as primary obstacles to employment, healthcare, and community participation.

2. The Evidence: Research and Statistics

2.1 Population and Impact

Metric	Statistic
U.S. Autistic Adults	5+ million
Find Travel Difficult/Impossible	87%
Lack Transportation Access	40%+
College-Educated Unemployment	85%+
Autism Prevalence (Children)	1 in 31 (3.2%)
Anxiety Prevalence vs. General Pop.	5x higher

Source: CDC (2025), National Autistic Society UK (2025), Multiple peer-reviewed studies

2.2 Evidence-Based Interventions That Work

Peer-Mediated Travel Training (Pfeiffer et al., 2024):

- **Randomized Control Trial:** 75 participants, Temple/Drexel/Rutgers Universities
- **Results:** $p < 0.0001$ (highly statistically significant)
- **Effect Size:** Cohen's $d = 1.92$ (very large effect)
- **Feasibility:** 98% data collection rate, zero dropouts
- **Outcome:** Significant improvement in travel skills and community mobility

Key Finding: Peer support from individuals with lived experience significantly improves travel independence and confidence. This demonstrates the value of connecting experienced autistic travelers with those developing their skills.

3. Industry Progress: Significant Momentum 2024-2025

The travel industry has demonstrated remarkable commitment to autism accessibility:

3.1 Airport Certifications and Facilities

- **Toledo Express Airport (May 2025):** First U.S. airport with Certified Autism Center designation
- **Dubai International (2025):** First international airport certified, world's largest for international traffic
- **Salt Lake City International (March 2025):** Three sensory rooms, first U.S. airport to provide adult guide
- **Major airports with sensory rooms:** Pittsburgh (1,500 sq ft), Boston Logan (24/7 access), Atlanta, Miami, Newark

3.2 Global Training and Recognition Programs

- **IBCCES Certification:** 300+ certified locations globally, 80% staff training requirement
- **Plaza Premium Group:** 3,000+ staff trained across global airport lounges
- **Hidden Disabilities Sunflower:** 300+ airports worldwide participating
- **Airlines:** Emirates (first certified airline), Air Canada (expanded Autism Aviation Days)

Recognition of Adult Needs:

- Pittsburgh International: "What we heard was less is more"—understanding adult preferences differ from children
- Salt Lake City: First to create adult-specific guide, recognizing distinct needs

Critical Observation: The infrastructure is developing. Certifications are expanding. Training is happening. However, autistic adults still struggle to find this information, connect with peers who've navigated these facilities, and access adult-appropriate resources.

4. The Critical Gap: What's Still Missing

Despite unprecedented industry progress, three fundamental gaps prevent autistic adults from accessing available accommodations:

4.1 Information Fragmentation

The Problem:

- Information about autism-friendly travel options is scattered across hundreds of websites
- No single, reliable resource compiling verified autism-friendly locations
- Travelers spend hours researching, often missing available accommodations
- Information frequently outdated or unverified
- Difficult to distinguish between truly autism-friendly and merely ADA-compliant

What's Needed:

- ✓ Centralized database of verified autism-friendly travel locations
- ✓ Current, accurate information about available accommodations
- ✓ Search functionality by location, certification, and specific needs
- ✓ Regular updates as new certifications and facilities are added

4.2 Absence of Peer Support Networks

The Problem:

- Research proves peer-mediated training is highly effective ($p < 0.0001$)
- Yet no platform connects experienced autistic travelers with those developing skills
- Autistic adults are independently solving the same problems without benefit of community wisdom
- Families have support groups; independent adults largely don't
- First-hand travel experiences and tips remain siloed

What's Needed:

- ✓ Platform for autistic travelers to connect and share experiences
- ✓ Peer mentorship matching experienced with novice travelers
- ✓ Community-sourced travel tips and strategies
- ✓ Safe space for autistic adults to ask questions without judgment

4.3 Lack of Adult-Specific Resources

The Problem:

- Most autism travel resources focus on families with children
- Independent adults aged 30+ face different challenges than families
- Adult-appropriate guides, social stories, and preparation materials are rare
- Industry accommodations improving but information targeted to families

- Research gap: Very little data on adult travel patterns and specific needs

What's Needed:

- ✓ Resources specifically designed for independent autistic adults
- ✓ Adult-appropriate preparation materials and guides
- ✓ Data collection on adult travel experiences to inform research
- ✓ Advocacy voice representing adult autistic travelers in policy discussions

5. Bridging the Gap: A Comprehensive Solution

The research evidence is clear. The industry is committed. The community need is documented. What's missing is the bridge—a comprehensive platform that connects autistic adult travelers with the information, peers, and resources they need.

5.1 Core Components of an Effective Solution

1. Centralized Information Hub

Essential Features:

- Comprehensive database of verified autism-friendly airports, airlines, hotels, and attractions
- Searchable by location, certification status, and specific accommodations
- Current information on sensory rooms, quiet spaces, and autism-friendly programs
- Links to official resources and contact information
- Regular updates as new certifications and facilities are added

Why This Matters:

Currently, autistic adults must visit dozens of websites to piece together information. A centralized hub reduces research burden, ensures current information, and makes autism-friendly options discoverable. This directly addresses the fragmentation problem identified in research.

2. Peer Support Network

Essential Features:

- Platform for autistic adults to connect based on travel interests and experience levels
- Peer mentorship program matching experienced travelers with those developing skills
- Community forum for sharing experiences, tips, and strategies
- First-person travel stories and reviews from autistic adults
- Safe, moderated space designed for autistic communication styles

Why This Matters:

The peer-mediated training RCT demonstrated highly significant effectiveness ($p < 0.0001$, Cohen's $d = 1.92$). Creating systematic peer connections leverages this proven intervention at scale. This addresses both the evidence-based solution and the community need for connection.

3. Adult-Specific Resources

Essential Features:

- Travel guides and preparation materials designed for independent adults
- Adult-appropriate social stories and visual guides
- Practical strategies for managing sensory overload and anxiety during travel
- Information on communicating needs to travel providers
- Resources on rights and accommodations under disability law

Why This Matters:

Adults aged 30+ have different needs, communication styles, and travel patterns than families with children. Adult-specific resources respect autistic adults' autonomy while providing practical support. This addresses the service design gap identified in research.

4. Research and Advocacy Platform

Essential Features:

- Mechanism for collecting data on autistic adult travel experiences
- Participatory research opportunities centering autistic voices
- Advocacy efforts informed by community data and lived experience
- Partnership development with travel industry for authentic consultation
- Policy recommendations based on evidence and community needs

Why This Matters:

Research consistently identifies lack of data on autistic adult travel as a critical gap. A platform that systematically collects experiences creates evidence base for advocacy, informs industry improvements, and ensures autistic adults have voice in policy decisions. This addresses the research gap and enables "Nothing About Us Without Us."

6. Implementation Priorities and Expected Impact

6.1 Phase 1: Foundation (Months 1-6)

- **Information Hub:** Launch database with verified autism-friendly airports and major airlines
- **Community Platform:** Establish peer connection infrastructure and moderation protocols
- **Initial Resources:** Develop core adult-specific travel guides
- **Research Framework:** Design data collection methods centering autistic input

6.2 Phase 2: Growth (Months 7-18)

- **Expanded Database:** Add hotels, attractions, and international locations
- **Peer Mentorship:** Launch structured mentorship program based on RCT evidence
- **Resource Library:** Comprehensive guides for different travel scenarios
- **Industry Partnerships:** Collaborate with certified locations for accurate information

6.3 Expected Impact

For Autistic Adults:

- Reduced research time finding autism-friendly options
- Access to peer support and mentorship
- Increased travel confidence and independence
- Better preparation leading to reduced anxiety

For Travel Industry:

- Increased visibility for autism-friendly certifications and accommodations
- Direct feedback from autistic adult travelers
- Partnership opportunities with authentic autism advocacy
- Access to growing market of autistic adult travelers

For Research Community:

- Systematic data collection on autistic adult travel experiences
- Evidence base for advocacy and policy recommendations
- Participatory research opportunities with community

7. Call to Action: The Time Is Now

The research is clear. The industry is committed. The community is ready. What's needed now is coordinated action to bridge the gap between progress and access.

7.1 For Funders and Foundations

Support initiatives that:

- Create centralized, accessible information for autistic adult travelers
- Build peer support networks based on proven interventions
- Develop adult-specific resources respecting autonomy and lived experience
- Enable participatory research centering autistic voices
- Prioritize adult-focused solutions to address documented service gaps

7.2 For Travel Industry Partners

- Partner with platforms that connect autistic adults to your autism-friendly services
- Provide accurate, current information about accommodations
- Seek authentic consultation from autistic adults in service design
- Recognize that adult needs differ from family-focused accommodations

7.3 For Autism Organizations

- Advocate for adult-specific travel resources and research
- Support initiatives bridging information, peer, and resource gaps
- Amplify autistic voices in travel accessibility discussions
- Collaborate on participatory research and advocacy

7.4 For Researchers

- Prioritize autistic adult travel as distinct from family-focused research
- Design participatory studies centering lived experience
- Investigate effectiveness of peer support and centralized resources
- Partner with community platforms for data collection and dissemination

8. Conclusion

This white paper documents a rare convergence: robust research evidence, demonstrated industry commitment, and clearly articulated community need. The gap is not a lack of will or resources—it's the absence of infrastructure connecting these elements.

The Evidence Is Clear:

- 87% of autistic people find independent travel difficult or impossible
- 5+ million U.S. autistic adults represent underserved market
- Peer-mediated interventions show highly significant effectiveness
- Transportation barriers directly impact employment and quality of life

The Infrastructure Is Developing:

- 300+ certified autism-friendly locations globally
- 3,000+ trained travel professionals
- Major airports achieving certification
- Growing recognition of adult-specific needs

The Gap Remains:

- No centralized information hub
- No systematic peer support networks
- Limited adult-specific resources
- Insufficient data and autistic voice in policy

Organizations and initiatives that successfully bridge these gaps—connecting information, peers, and resources while centering autistic voices—will not only serve a profoundly underserved population but also contribute to the broader movement toward authentic inclusion.

The infrastructure is being built. The community is waiting. The evidence supports action. What's needed is the bridge.

"Nothing About Us Without Us"

The opportunity exists. The time is now.

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About This White Paper

This white paper synthesizes peer-reviewed research from academic institutions across Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, combined with verified industry data from 2024-2025.

All statistics and claims have been verified through multiple independent sources including the National Autistic Society (UK), CDC, and peer-reviewed academic journals.

This research documents the critical gap between expanding industry accommodations and the practical barriers autistic adults face accessing these resources.

The solution requires bridging information fragmentation, building peer support networks, and creating adult-specific resources—connecting autistic adults with the tools and community they need to travel independently.