

Recent Research on Autism and Travel

Comprehensive Review: 2024-2025

Compiled for AutismTrek

Executive Summary

This document compiles the most recent research and developments in autism and travel from 2024-2025. Key findings demonstrate significant progress in autism-friendly travel initiatives, with emphasis on airport accessibility, staff training, sensory accommodations, and participatory design involving autistic individuals.

Key Findings

- March 2025: National Autistic Society launched comprehensive UK travel research with 4,052 survey responses highlighting that 87% of autistic people find independent travel difficult or impossible
- Dubai International Airport became the first international airport to receive Certified Autism Center designation in 2025
- Salt Lake City Airport opened three sensory rooms in March 2025 and introduced adult guide for neurodivergent passengers
- Air Canada expanded Autism Aviation Days program to six Canadian events in 2025
- Plaza Premium Group partnership with IBCCES will train 3,000+ staff across global airport lounges
- CDC data shows autism prevalence has risen to approximately 1 in 31 children in the United States as of May 2025

1. Empowering Autistic Travel Research Report (UK)

Publication Details

- Published: March 27, 2025
- Organization: National Autistic Society (UK)
- Funding: Motability Foundation
- Duration: April 2024 - March 2025

Methodology

- 4,052 survey responses from autistic people and families
- 20 in-depth interviews with autistic people and parents/carers
- 22 transport professional consultations
- Focus on trains, buses, and taxis/rideshares as most common transport modes

Critical Findings

Independent Travel Challenges: 87% of autistic people reported that independent travel is either hugely problematic or impossible. This staggering statistic highlights the urgent need for systemic changes in public transport accessibility.

Key Barriers Identified:

- Unpredictability of journeys and lack of advance information
- Sensory overload from noise, crowds, and bright lights
- Poor recognition and understanding from transport staff
- Lack of empathy from general public
- Inadequate environmental accommodations

Recommendations

- Environmental modifications to reduce sensory challenges
- Improved and more accessible information systems
- Comprehensive staff training programs
- Public awareness campaigns to create societal change
- Expansion of existing good practice examples

2. Airport Accessibility Developments (2024-2025)

Dubai International Airport - First International Certified Autism Center

- Achievement: First international airport to receive Certified Autism Center designation from IBCCES
- Status: World's largest airport for international passenger traffic
- Training: Comprehensive staff training completed across all departments
- Partnership: Coordinated with Emirates Airlines autism certification

Salt Lake City International Airport

- March 2025: Opened three sensory rooms with comprehensive equipment
- First U.S. airport to provide adult guide for neurodivergent passengers
- Sensory bags available post-security including earmuffs, fidget toys, nonverbal communication cards, glare reducing glasses, and weighted lap pads
- Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program participation since 2019
- One-on-one and group accessibility tours available

Toledo Express Airport

May 14, 2025: Eugene F. Kranz Toledo Express Airport became the first airport in the United States to receive the Certified Autism Center designation from IBCCES, setting a new standard for U.S. airport accessibility.

Global Airport Sensory Room Expansion

- Pittsburgh International: 1,500 sq ft Presley's Place with soundproof rooms and mock airplane cabin
- Boston Logan: Terminal E sensory room with flight simulation, 24/7 access
- Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson: Delta Sensory Rooms in F Concourse and Terminal C
- Miami International: Two multi-sensory rooms in Concourse D and J
- Newark Liberty: Two sensory rooms in Terminal A opened 2024

3. Airline Industry Initiatives

Air Canada Autism Aviation Days Program (2025)

Program Overview: Simulated travel experiences providing authentic airport and flight rehearsals for autistic individuals and families.

- 2025 Expansion: Six events planned across Canada
- First Event: April 2025 in Edmonton with Autism Edmonton and Edmonton International Airport
- Partners: Canucks Autism Network and multiple airport authorities
- Innovation: Specialized kits for participants with items to prepare for air travel

Program Components:

- Designated check-in counters with printed boarding passes
- Security procedures walkthrough
- Simulated plane noises during taxiing
- On-board aircraft exploration

2024-2025 Achievements:

- 577,000 customers with disabilities requested accessibility assistance
- Enhanced training on accessibility and disability awareness for all employees
- Improved accessibility equipment in airports
- 56% of frequent travelers noticed improvements in past year
- 76% agreed accessibility services make travel easier

Delta Air Lines Autism Support

- Multi-sensory rooms in Atlanta and New York JFK for ticketed passengers
- Navigating MSP program: Free practice runs through airport and on aircraft at Minneapolis-St. Paul
- Mock cabin facility for familiarization when actual aircraft unavailable
- Delta employee volunteers with family disability experience provide guidance
- 14 years partnership with Advisory Board on Disability

4. Major Industry Partnerships and Certifications

IBCCES and Plaza Premium Group Partnership (2025)

Announcement: May 28, 2025 - Major global partnership to expand accessibility in airport hospitality across 300+ locations worldwide.

Scale:

- 3,000+ Plaza Premium Group frontline staff to receive IBCCES training
- Up to 200 business units including lounges, dining outlets, hotels, passenger service areas
- Initial markets: Hong Kong, Canada, Malaysia, UK, and Italy

Program Components:

- On-site accessibility audits in select lounges
- Optimization for sensory and physical accessibility needs

- Listings in IBCCES Accessibility App used by millions globally
- Introduction to broader network of airport and airline partners

Certified Autism Center Expansion

- 300+ certified locations worldwide as of 2025
- PEPPA PIG Theme Park Dallas-Fort Worth: Certified before March 1, 2025 opening
- Yas Theme Parks (Abu Dhabi): Achieved CAC designation reinforcing city's accessibility commitment
- Multiple hotel chains certified including Virgin Hotels, Hyatt, and Hilton properties

5. Autism Travel Support Programs

Wings for Autism/Wings for All (The Arc)

Program Description: Airport rehearsal experiences providing practice runs through entire travel process from check-in to boarding.

2025 Schedule:

- November 8, 2025: Dane County Regional Airport (MSN)
- November 15, 2025: Syracuse Hancock International Airport (SYR)
- Dozens of events annually across the United States

Recent Expansion:

July 25, 2025: Tampa International Airport partnership with Arc Tampa Bay Foundation and Southwest Airlines launched first Wings for Autism event in the region.

Participant Activities:

- Check-in to receive boarding passes
- Pass through TSA security checkpoint
- Wait in boarding area
- Board actual aircraft (that does not take off)

TSA Cares and Airport Security Support

- TSA Cares helpline: 855-787-2227 (call 72 hours before flight)
- Passenger Support Specialists available at security checkpoints
- TSA Notification Cards available for download at [tsa.gov](https://www.tsa.gov)
- Assistance with security screening process for travelers with disabilities

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program

- 300+ airports worldwide participating as of 2025
- Free lanyards, bracelets, or pins available at airport information desks
- Discreet way to signal need for additional support
- Staff training programs ensure recognition across airports

6. Research on Autistic Adults and Travel

Active Travel Study: Young Autistic Adults (2025)

Publication: Published September 10, 2025 in peer-reviewed journal

Focus: Walking behavior and urban travel patterns of autistic adults compared to neurotypical peers

Key Finding: Young autistic adults' walking behaviors mirror those of older adults, showing similarly reduced odds of walking to local destinations compared to young neurotypical adults.

- Study included 30 young autistic adults (18-39 years) living independently
- Compared with 30 young neurotypical adults and 24 older adults (65+)
- Highlights need for more inclusive urban design and planning initiatives

Peer-Mediated Travel Training Intervention

Publication: March 7, 2024 in ScienceDirect

Study Type: Randomized Control Trial evaluating peer-mediated travel training for autistic adults

Purpose: Improve public transportation travel independence to increase community access

Results: Identified promise for comprehensive peer-mediated interventions to improve travel skills and community mobility for autistic adults

- Transportation barriers contribute to underutilization of public transit by autistic individuals
- Quality of life improves with adequate transportation access
- Positive effects on employment, social participation, and healthcare access

Travel as Therapy: Autistic Adult Perspective

Publication: July 5, 2025 - Travelability Insider

Author: Alex Stratikis (Autism Adventures Abroad) - autistic traveler who has visited 65+ countries

Key Themes:

- Solo travel as form of therapy fostering personal growth and emotional healing
- Travel provides liberation from rigid routines while encouraging flexibility and independence
- Sensory-friendly experiences like quiet beaches offer moments of calm
- Importance of preparation, self-advocacy, and managing sensory input
- Travel becomes transformative tool for self-understanding and identity development

7. Current Autism Prevalence and Demographics

CDC Data (May 27, 2025)

- Approximately 1 in 31 children (3.2%) aged 8 years identified with ASD
- Dramatic increase from fewer than 1 in 2,000 children in the 1970s
- ASD is over 3 times more common among boys than girls
- ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups
- About 1 in 6 children aged 3-17 diagnosed with developmental disability

NIH Autism Data Science Initiative (September 2025)

Investment: \$50 million+ in awards supporting 13 research projects

Focus Areas:

- Contributors to causes and rising prevalence of autism
- Genomic, epigenomic, metabolomic, proteomic data analysis
- Clinical, behavioral and autism services data
- Adult outcomes including community participation and mental health
- Service innovations for improved quality of life

Adult Autism Population

CDC 2020 study estimated more than 5 million adults in the United States are autistic. This represents a significant but underserved population with high rates of undiagnosed individuals and very little research about travel patterns, needs, or barriers facing neurodivergent adults.

8. Professional Training and Certification Programs

IBCCES Certification Programs

- Certified Autism Center (CAC): Organizations where 80%+ staff trained and certified
- Advanced Certified Autism Center (ACAC): Level 2 certification for organizations going above and beyond
- Certified Autism Travel Professional (CATP): Individual professional certification
- Certified Autism Destination (CAD): Entire destination certification

Autism Double-Checked Programs

- Autism Aware Training: Sensitivity training for staff
- Autism Ready Training: Job-specific support strategies
- Visitor/Passenger Guides for each certified location
- Autism Concierge service
- Searchable directory in development for families to find certified locations

9. Practical Travel Resources and Tools

Airline Booking Codes

DPNA Code: Disabled Passenger with Intellectual or Developmental Disability Needing Assistance

- Can be added when booking flight ticket
- Alerts airline staff that passenger may need specialized assistance
- Enables priority boarding
- Ensures guaranteed seating with companion

Travel Planning Recommendations

- Select flight times aligned with calm periods of day
- Avoid red-eye or overnight flights that disrupt sleep
- Request bulkhead or aisle seats for extra space and accessibility
- Contact airports/airlines 72 hours in advance for assistance
- Pack sensory toolkit: noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, fidget toys
- Allow extra time to reduce pressure
- Use visual supports and social stories for preparation

Online Resources

- AutismTravel.com: Directory of Certified Autism Centers and travel professionals
- IBCCES Accessibility App: Lists 200+ certified business units globally
- TSA.gov: Download TSA Notification Cards
- Hidden Disabilities Sunflower (hdsunflower.com): Program information and locations

10. Emerging Trends and Future Directions

Technology Integration

- Virtual reality for airport familiarization and preparation
- Digital sensory guides providing detailed environmental information
- Mobile apps for real-time navigation and support
- Immersive previews of airport and airplane environments

Advocacy and Policy

- Push for comprehensive accessibility measures across travel industry
- Culture of inclusion benefiting all travelers
- Standardization of autism-friendly practices globally
- Integration of lived experience in policy development

Industry Movement Toward Inclusion

Autism awareness training for travel industry becoming standard practice. Organizations recognize it not only helps neurodivergent travelers but also benefits businesses by tapping into large, growing, and loyal customer base. The dream of

hassle-free travel is becoming reality for countless families and individuals as more airlines and airports embrace autism-friendly initiatives.

11. Key Organizations and Stakeholders

Research and Advocacy Organizations

- National Autistic Society (UK): Leading research and advocacy, published major 2025 travel report
- Motability Foundation: Funded UK travel research project
- The Arc: Created and operates Wings for Autism/Wings for All program
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN): Led by autistic individuals
- Organization for Autism Research (OAR): Grants and research funding

Certification and Training Bodies

- IBCCES: International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards - global leader in autism certification
- Autism Double-Checked: Certifies companies and organizations for autism services

Major Travel Industry Participants

- Airlines: Emirates (first certified airline), Air Canada, Delta, United, Southwest
- Airports: Dubai International, Salt Lake City, Toledo Express, Pittsburgh, Boston Logan, Atlanta
- Hotels: Virgin Hotels, Hyatt, Hilton properties with certification
- Theme Parks: PEPPA PIG Dallas-Fort Worth, Yas Island Abu Dhabi

12. Implications for AutismTrek

Market Opportunity

- 5+ million autistic adults in U.S. with high rates of undiagnosed individuals
- 87% find independent travel difficult or impossible - clear need for support
- Very little research on travel patterns of neurodivergent adults
- Growing industry movement creates supportive ecosystem for initiatives

Strategic Positioning

- Focus on adults 30+ addresses underserved segment
- Level 1 and Level 2 autism focus on independent/semi-independent travelers
- Peer support model complements professional services
- Research component addresses critical knowledge gaps

Partnership Opportunities

- IBCCES: Access to 300+ certified locations, potential collaboration on adult-focused certification
- The Arc: Wings program partnership for adult familiarization events
- Airports: Salt Lake City, Pittsburgh, others with mature autism-friendly programs
- Airlines: Air Canada, Delta, Emirates with established accessibility programs

- Research institutions: Academic partnerships for adult autism and travel studies

Key Success Factors

- Authentic autistic leadership and governance essential
- Evidence-based approach building on existing research
- Collaborative rather than competitive positioning with existing organizations
- Focus on peer support and lived experience
- Addressing documented gaps in services and research

Conclusion

The 2024-2025 period represents significant progress in autism-friendly travel initiatives. Major developments include the National Autistic Society's comprehensive UK research highlighting the 87% struggle rate with independent travel, Dubai International becoming the first certified international airport, expansion of sensory rooms and support programs globally, and major industry partnerships like IBCCES with Plaza Premium Group.

Research consistently emphasizes the critical importance of staff training, environmental modifications, sensory accommodations, and participatory design with autistic individuals. The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program has expanded to 300+ airports worldwide, and programs like Wings for Autism continue to provide valuable familiarization experiences.

However, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding autistic adults. With over 5 million autistic adults in the U.S. and 87% finding independent travel difficult or impossible, there is clear need for targeted support, research, and advocacy. AutismTrek's focus on independent adults aged 30+ with Level 1 and Level 2 autism addresses this underserved population.

The growing movement toward autism-friendly travel creates an supportive ecosystem for new initiatives. By building on existing research, partnering with established organizations, and maintaining authentic autistic leadership, AutismTrek can contribute meaningfully to making travel more accessible and enjoyable for autistic adults worldwide.

Document Information

- Compiled: October 2025
- Research Period: 2024-2025
- Focus: Recent developments in autism and travel accessibility
- Prepared for: AutismTrek strategic planning