

Vacations and the Downtime that Follows

By Bailey Strangman, M.A., BCBA,

Northeast Arc Autism ABA Program

School has been in session and daily routines have been established for families and their children. However everyone deserves some time off to relax, take trips, visit family and friends or the opportunity to just sleep in! The word vacation may hold a different meaning for families who have a child with a disability. For these children a change in routine may increase challenging behaviors and anxiety during the unstructured vacation time. Below is a list of suggestions to help prepare you and your family for any upcoming break from the ordinary.

- **Plan ahead!** Create a basic structure of what the vacation will entail. Whether you are planning on travelling or staying at home, having a general idea of what each day looks like will provide some structure throughout the vacation time. This will also allow you to add in some unexpected activities!
- **Consult with your BCBA** or teacher about successful strategies for flexibility and change in routine. They may be able to provide you with simple tips that will make vacation more relaxing for all.
- **If your child has a morning routine** or an evening routine stick with it throughout vacation. This provides your child with a familiar structure and will also ease the transition back to school.
- **Allow your child to make choices.** They may not know what to do with the free time or what exactly is expected of them. For example, giving them a choice between playing with their favorite puzzle, watching a movie or watching YouTube videos.
- **Utilize visual schedules!** Visualizing what is expected may reduce anxiety and anticipation of what may lie ahead. These schedules may include pictures or written activities. When making the schedule of the day, include your child in the process! This is a great way to incorporate them as well as allowing them to make choices as to what their day will look like!
- **Calendars are a great way to visualize** upcoming vacations, holidays or any other scheduled plans. As each day passes cross off the present day and count the days left until the event.
- **Social stories!** Create a social story (or ask teacher and/or BCBA for one) about upcoming events, so you can discuss what to expect and safety rules. These stories are a fun way to inform your child of what the vacation may entail and how they will spend their time during it. These stories could be done while referencing the visual calendar.
- **Role-play and practice** during the

weekends if you and your family are planning any new activity during the break. Such as, role-playing any safety concerns that may arise and including other family members into the practice. This allows all members of the family to participate and help prepare the child for twists and turns along the way. Practice makes better!

- **Try to minimize demands** that are placed on

the child and increase positive reinforcement. Provide social praise, items or activities that your child enjoys for compliance (waiting/ listening/etc.), acting appropriately or being flexible during the day.

Please note that these are suggestions and are not an exhaustive list of guidelines. I hope you find some of these tips helpful. And remember enjoy your vacation! You all have worked hard and have earned some relaxation time!

