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# PROMISING PRACTICES



## Airport practice tours ground flying anxieties

Every parent knows that flying with children can be unsettling. For children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the experience can be traumatizing for them and their families as well as for other passengers, airport workers, and the flight crew. Many families avoid air travel altogether because of concerns about how their child might react to the unknowns of flying.



Now, families in the Minneapolis–St. Paul (MSP) area who need specialized travel accommodations can become more comfortable with

airline travel through the Navigating Autism with MSP program, a collaboration of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC); the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM); and [Fraser](#), one of Minnesota's largest and most experienced providers of autism services.

Navigating Autism with MSP is conducted one Saturday each month at the MSP International Airport. The program includes several events, each designed for children with ASD and their families, to reinforce the idea that the airport is a fun place.

"Navigating Autism with MSP is designed to familiarize participants with every step of the air travel process, from parking their vehicle at the airport to buckling their seatbelt on a plane," says Shelly Lopez, MAC administrative supervisor. "Children with autism who are familiar with the sights, sounds, and spaces at the airport are more likely to respond well to actual plane trips."

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### About the ECS Promising Practices newsletter series

An organization receiving exemplary recognition in its CARF survey report stands out because of its professional and strategic response to a service or business need. CARF presents these ECS Promising Practices articles to encourage dialogue among service providers and to offer examples of creative solutions for improving service quality.

Find current and past issues of ECS Promising Practices at:

[www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices](http://www.carf.org/ecspromisingpractices)

Issues are categorized by topic: Business Practices, Community Services, and Employment Services.

Before families head to the airport, they read a social story explaining step by step what they will see and do at the airport and on a plane. They also receive a gift bag that includes sensory toys, a children's book, and giveaways from the airport.

Representatives from airlines (including a Delta Air Lines pilot), Transportation Security Administration, and Airport Foundation MSP join with Fraser and AuSM staff members in assisting families during the practice tour.

Families come to the airport, undergo security screening, find their gate, scan their tickets, and board a plane. Once the families are safely buckled in their seats, a Delta representative makes an announcement to replicate an actual flight and remains on board to answer questions.

The tour also includes opportunities to visit the children's play area and observation deck, ride the airport tram, shop, and purchase a meal at an airport restaurant. The visit concludes in the baggage claim area.

"The anticipation and anxiety a parent may have about their child with autism traveling can be significant, and this program offers an opportunity for a trial run," says Chris Bentley, director at Fraser. "Families are paired with Travelers Assistance volunteers who have proven to be friendly and helpful, making the experience positive."

A recent [CARF International](#) survey report noted, "This unique training program provides a great benefit to persons served and their families and has heightened the awareness of the needs of persons with ASD with the general public and, in particular, the airline industry."

One parent who participated in Navigating Autism with MSP adds, "We have four children, including three with autism. They really enjoyed the tour, learned new things, and had a blast. My children's anxiety levels about airport security are much more manageable now, having had this experience."

"The more people understand autism, the better equipped they are to accommodate the needs of travelers with autism," Lopez concludes. "Our goal, ultimately, is to make air travel a viable option for more people with autism and their families."

*Below: Participating in the Navigating Autism with MSP program, youngsters discover that the airport is a fun place.*



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For more information about Navigating Autism with MSP, visit the Fraser website at [www.fraser.org](http://www.fraser.org) or contact Chris Bentley, director, at [Chris.Bentley@Fraser.org](mailto:Chris.Bentley@Fraser.org).

[www.carf.org](http://www.carf.org)