



Trips with kids with special needs is possible

Candy Grande

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Joseph Mancini and his wife, Rachel Grimaldi, look forward to taking vacations with their four children, Matteo, 20; Lillian, 10; Julia, 9 and 8-year-old Benjamin.

The family has been to Walt Disney World multiple times; Mexico, Punta Cana, Canada, South Carolina, Washington, D.C., and more. Daughter Lillian has special needs but with a little research on Joseph and Rachel's part the family continues to make memories exploring exciting destinations together.

"Lillian has a developmental disorder call dyspraxia, so she's cognitively brilliant but she has coordination problems, muscle tightness, balance issues and she is legally blind," says Mancini. "My daughter also is probably on the autism spectrum, but she's never been tested. She has sensory issues with noise and crowds so traveling, especially in airports, is extremely difficult. But as a family, we don't let a disability hinder us in any way, shape or form. We just do some planning and make accommodations."

Mancini says he and his wife try to use smaller airports when flying and call airports, resorts and theme parks before their trip to see what accommodations can be made for their daughter.

"If we are walking in a theme park and Lillian's legs start hurting, I can pick her up and carry her or, if a noise bothers her, we have headphones we can put on her," says Mancini. "But we feel lucky, we have a far less barrier when it comes to traveling than some families I work with."

Mancini is the executive director of The Arc of Philadelphia and oversees a variety of programs that promote opportunities for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities on a state and national level. His daughter is his inspiration, and he has been an integral part of the Wings for All program and helped construct a sensory room at the Lehigh Valley International Airport in Allentown. Both are helping

more families travel for vacation.

Wings for All is an annual event at the airport for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, especially those with autism. Families can simulate an authentic airport experience by entering the airport, getting boarding passes, going through security and boarding a grounded plane. The plane does not take off, but guests can speak with flight attendants and pilots to better prepare for their flying experience.

"Sometimes it takes awhile, but this program does help families," says Mancini. "The first year, there was a boy who wouldn't even come into the airport. By the fifth year he was sitting on the plane."

A room of their own

Adding a sensory room to the Lehigh

See TRIPS, Page 8C

Valley International Airport was also Mancini's doing. When it was unveiled last May, it was the third airport worldwide to have this room. At the time, only Atlanta, Georgia, and Ireland had an airport with a sensory-friendly room for guests, he says.

"This is one of my proudest accomplishment," says Mancini. "I wanted to create this room because I knew my daughter and others could really benefit from it. Our grant was rejected but I didn't quit on this idea."

Mancini raised the money; researched and purchased equipment; designed the room, and more to have this space constructed. About six months after the initial rejection, the room was constructed and open for guests with disabilities that want to travel.

Lillian and other kids even helped with project by spackling and painting walls.

"It is so beneficial to take a break from the routine and experience something different together as a family," says Mancini. "Taking a family vacation is far less likely to happen for those with a member who is on the autism spectrum or has another disability for finan-



cial reasons, time or other constraints. When they do get to travel, it's a far more meaningful experience."

Denise Aloisio, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician who specializes in childhood autism and is affiliated with the Hackensack Meridian Health K. Hovnanian Children's Hospital at the Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune City, Monmouth County, says traveling with children who have autism spectrum disorder may be more challenging but is worthwhile.

"Autism spectrum disorder is a social disorder and affects how people process information," says Aloisio. "Some problems that can be encountered on vacation may be due to sensory factors, such as having trouble with new settings, loud noises or smells. But it is essential to go away and recharge with your family. You build memories together. Remember, a child is a child first."

Aloisio recommends calling places

in advance and speaking with guest services to see what can be done to help a child with autism or other challenges. She also suggests bringing a bag filled with toys, snacks and of a child's favorites to help occupy them on a flight, going to a restaurant for dinner, and other places.

"I tell parents having an exit plan helps, too," she says. "If you are at a place and it gets overwhelming take a break. Maybe designate one parent to go back to the room if needed, or go to a corner, put headphones on the child and try to help them reset if you can't leave."

Including children in vacation plans and preparing them prior to leaving is beneficial, says Aloisio.

"Usually children with autism spectrum disorder are very visual, so make them a picture guide, show them maps of the hotels, parks, resorts, show them theme park rides online," she says.