

Vacation Meltdown Survival Guide

Turn vacation meltdowns into vacation memories.

A calm, step-by-step plan for parents of kids with ADHD, autism, anxiety, or big feelings — at water parks, hotels, airports, restaurants, and long lines.

Inside this guide

- The 3 reasons vacations trigger meltdowns (and what to do)
- The 5-minute pre-trip behavior plan
- Scripts for water parks, hotels, airports, and lines
- The Calm Reset (a 90-second de-escalation tool)
- I Do / We Do / You Do — practice on the plane or in the car

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Why vacations break the wheels off

Vacation looks fun on Instagram. For a child with ADHD, autism, anxiety, or sensory needs, vacation is mostly **change**. Change of routine, food, sleep, smells, noise, and rules. That's a lot of weight on a small nervous system.

Three big triggers:

- **Routine loss** — meals, sleep, and transitions shift. The brain works harder.
- **Sensory overload** — water, crowds, loud rides, new textures, bright sun.
- **Demand stacking** — wait in line, then ride, then change clothes, then walk, then eat.

When you see the behavior, name the trigger first. The fix lives there.

The 5-minute pre-trip behavior plan

Do this the night before — or in the car on the way.

Step 1. Pick the *one* hardest moment of the day (line, transition, leaving).

Step 2. Decide the *signal* your child will give when they need a break (a word, a hand squeeze, a card).

Step 3. Decide the *exit plan* — the bench, the shade spot, the hotel room.

Step 4. Pack one regulating item (headphones, fidget, snack, water).

Step 5. Tell your child the plan in 3 sentences. Then repeat once.

Scripts for the hardest places

Water park

Say: “The water is loud. We're going to watch for 2 minutes before we go in. Tell me when your body feels ready.”

- Start at the edge, feet only.
- Use a countdown: 'In 3 we walk to the slide.'
- Honor the signal. Leaving early is a win, not a fail.

Hotel room

Say: “This room is new. Let's find your 3 safe spots — your bed, the bathroom light, and one quiet corner.”

- Set up familiar items first (pillow, blanket, toy).
- Keep one routine sacred (book before bed, song, prayer).
- Dim the lights 30 minutes before sleep.

Airport

Say: “Security is loud and busy. We'll hold hands and walk slow. If it gets too much, squeeze my hand twice.”

- Headphones on before TSA line.
- Snack and water in an easy pocket.
- Pre-board if eligible — ask the gate agent.

Restaurant / long line

Say: “This line is long. We're going to count windows. When we get to 10, it's almost our turn.”

- Bring a small busy bag.
- Order ahead when possible.
- Step out if the wait grows — losing the table beats a meltdown.

The Calm Reset (90 seconds)

When the meltdown starts, the goal is not to stop it. It's to be the calm next to it.

Step 1 — Lower your body. Kneel or sit. Eye-level with your child.

Step 2 — Lower your voice. Half the volume, slower words.

Step 3 — Name it. “Your body is full. I'm right here.”

Step 4 — Offer one choice. “Water or shade?” Two options, that's it.

Step 5 — Wait. 30 seconds of silence is okay. Let the wave pass.

I Do / We Do / You Do (practice in the car)

I Do. You model: 'When the line gets long, I'll take a slow breath like this.'

We Do. You practice together: 'Let's both squeeze our hands and breathe out.'

You Do. Your child tries solo: 'Show me what you'll do when you feel full.'

Document what happened (so the next trip is easier)

After the day, write 3 lines:

- **What happened** — neutral, observable. ('At 2:14pm, after 25 min in line, child cried and sat down.')
- **What helped** — the thing that lowered the wave.
- **What we'll change** — one small adjustment for tomorrow.

Bright Steps turns these notes into a plan, a school letter, or a calm script — automatically.

Keep going with Bright Steps → behaviorgps.org

Free tools for parents of kids with ADHD, autism, anxiety, and sensory needs. Speak your situation, get a calm plan in seconds.

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