



## Summer Vacation – Austin, Texas

TxP2P Parent

Appearances may not initially allow anyone to realize the depth of his condition. After all, Austin wears weird as a badge. Quirky may be an initial momentary impression, but this is autism as it affects him and it has shades and flares. It's always different and changes over the years and not always for the better.

Puzzling as it is non-linear, the planning for occasions like travel or attending weddings, funerals or christenings are on the order of high wire contortionists performance. It requires hyper current determination of what is significant.

Every family is unique, especially every family who includes a child or young adult with a disability, and we are definitely no exception to that. Still on travel days, I see how we stand apart and are noticed for his ways and our ways of being. Experience fused with imagination fuels planning, sometimes good planning. And it fuels anxiety, second-guessing, fear, raw as it gets in our modern world where social threats are much more frequently encountered than are lions, tigers and bears. Our nervous systems attuned accordingly.

Now it's the Transportation Safety Authority (TSA) agent's eyes that dart like wild. It occurs to me that despite the lengthy, reassuringly thorough interview process I'd submitted to with the thoughtful voice of the airline's representative and the exhaustive arrangements and plans for everything we could imagine could happen, we are still not prepared in the face of the changing nature of my son's condition.

That preparatory conversation when the airline's representative so attentively noted how they would accommodate my son and confirmed the additional allowance for personal items on board in order to accommodate liquid medications and assistive devices in flight, will have no bearing here, now, with the Transportation Safety Agent facing us.

And I guess that's to be expected; the entities are separate and don't talk, though I'm wondering now if it would have been so hard for them to make a call or send a note to the security personnel on site or for the TSA to invite airlines to share lists of accommodated travelers. But it is part of the the reason that in in the past I'd only sporadically reported my son's condition to airline carriers prior to flights.

I did it this time because I'd heard that the accommodations offered would be much wider ranging and inclusive of persons with sensory disturbances like autism. That now, the accommodations were much more comprehensive and improved from the past when the only offer of accommodation was "priority boarding" which never seemed much help for us, particularly because we have no obvious mobility impairment. Unfailingly, the airline agents that handle boarding arrive at the desk moments before they

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begin seating and seemingly have no procedure to identify registered pre-boarding customers other than their visual survey of those waiting. At that point, we have no chance to introduce ourselves either.

They make their scan of the waiting area and which parties include strollers and/or young child or persons using crutches/walkers/wheel chairs. My son doesn't use those yet there can be mobility issues that affect him too.

It's tricky but in fact allowing my son a chance to get on the flight before it fills really might quell jitters. But in any case, the pre-boarding phase is so quick and without obvious symbols or cues in our possession, and my son's hesitancy, anxiety and sometimes freezing in place during transitions, we almost never made it to the entrance before they'd moved on announcing that the full crush is on and all passengers allowed to proceed to and through the narrow passage to board.

So I accepted that they were never prepared by that gracious airline representative and now are unprepared and we are unplanned for. So I tell her, while her wild eyes dart at our differences - my skin and hair, my husband, my son - and the longest look as she focuses effort at processing my son's appearance, demeanor and atypical responses and deep voice, distorted and mostly unintelligible, especially without practice and context.

I fully realize that regardless of the personal item accommodation the airline affords me, this TSA agent has no clue of it and surely wonders, "What's with all the stuff? The liquids?" soon after she asked for ID. In addition to producing photo ID for each of us, my husband and I offer to show her our airline ticketing confirmation along with confirmation of our notice to our carrier regarding my son's accommodation request and confirmation of the accommodations they granted. I have dutifully uploaded those and the boarding passes and ticketing information to my phone along with scans of my son's birth certificate and social security card. I have my passport and Texas Driver License and as does my husband because we'd heard that some driver licenses are not compliant with TSA regulation.

She accepts these for my husband and I then asks my son his age and gets no response she can use. I tell her he just turned 18, as of 5 days prior to this flight day. Now she is dissatisfied with my son's photo ID, as it is not state or federally issued, and goes on to say that the scanned birth certificate and Social Security Card are not useful because despite the widespread use of virtual ticketing and payment forms, the TSA has no use for photos or scans of any documents.

So I look through my wallet finding his municipally issued transit ID that bears his photo and features one of my arms, which insisted on holding onto as that photo, was taken. What could be more authentic? It documents our connection. Still she is dissatisfied and as I show her the state issued Medicaid card that bears no photo but ties him to a federal entitlement for persons with disability. I come to the realization that no document or card we're carrying will be enough for her and I tell her, awkward as it is and something I loathe to do in front of him and usually am able to avoid in these sort of situations, that my son is on the autism spectrum.

She informs me that all versions of ID he has is insufficient, as he is 18 years old and no longer a minor. I point to the photo on his school ID but it is not state issued and does not meet their standard. So I refer

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back to the social security card and birth certificate I've shown and she informs me that scanned copies don't meet TSA standards. TSA expects my son to travel with original documents despite his status as a high school student.

He has no driver license, as many persons with autism do not. While so many of our friends and family in my son's community earned their driver license, I'd managed to weather another milestone/rite of passage that disability would deny him. I offered cheery congratulations to those who shared that achievement with us. Afterward, I realized in addition to coping with another reminder of what sets my son apart from peers, I should have joined in the party and gotten him a DPS issued ID card at 16 as part of his transition plan. Most sons that turn 18 have had a TSA accepted ID for 2 years already in most states. But in the case of persons reaching adulthood with disability, the TSA does not recognize the types of incidentally acquired ID that it does for the general nondisabled public.

Identifying documents and cards that are meaningful and functional in the lives of persons who have childhood onset lifelong developmental disability have no use for TSA. Typical peers obtain their ID as a matter of course often on their own accord. For us, this is a transition item that should have been on the to do list, as you see, this TSA agent chose to focus her attention and the resources of the federal government on this gap in transition planning and today the consequence is that this officer require a pat down to release our son to fly with us.

She reacts to my face falling and tensing, full anguish and the disappointment that he has become subject to this attention. I choose to mention the social dysregulation that is part of how autism spectrum disorders manifest. Now, this TSA agent lady wants guidance pronto: I am to tell her in one or two words how she should go about accomplishing this body search she's decided on. What she should remember? She needs tips - a rule of thumb. Quick!!

I tell her in a word what we know, which is mostly that we don't know much, "He is unpredictable." She grimaces so I choose two pieces of additional information "Use your words and speak normally." She starts talking to him now in a cooing fashion and I attempt to correct this by stating the "that's baby talk" in the most even tone I can muster and that draws her glare. I explain, "That's not normal, you sound like you are talking to a baby and he's a man."

I chose to say it, felt I had to, knowing how baby talk may offend my son, and lead to the sort of outbursts we like to avoid, particularly when in the company of federal agents. Trying to be brief and efficiently guide her but I can tell now that it is not appreciated though she asked me. She doesn't like the advice and definitely not the correcting or coaching, which she responds to as reprimands.

My son continued to do remarkably well that day despite this hiccup. He went through the pat down and I guess it all turned out fine. This is true especially if I forget the way that the male TSA officer assigned to conduct the additional screening stepped out from behind the curtain relieved and smiling when it was all done. He recounted how well my son did with his requests and federally sanctioned personal boundary crossing during this preposterously unnecessary procedure. I know the officer was hoping to reassure me by marveling at the way my son had calmly submitted to the search and concluded the episode by reciprocating with gentle patting on the officers stubbled cheeks.

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"Bless them for they know not what they do!" This officer had no clue how creepy his retelling of his experience sounded to me and the context of our son's situation and our struggles to set appropriate physical boundaries in social settings with strangers and in public. He certainly had no idea how easily and in how many ways it all could have taken a wrong turn and derailed our travel day throwing us from the high wire in and exposing my son's condition in spectacular fashion. We feel the chill as they never will and escape their screening area with our chance to vacation and visit the precious steadfast family that we just have to see.

P.S. Interestingly, TSA personnel on the corresponding nonstop return flight originating from New York City's JFK airport were completely satisfied with the scanned birth certificate and SSN but said that the school ID was TSA acceptable...that day. So they kept their hands to themselves and reserved their resources for criminal threats.

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