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The Invisible Marathon

Understanding the effort, anxiety, and extraordinary resilience of parents with neurodivergent children in travel

Agend

01. Introduction

02. The planning process

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04. The emotional dissonance

05. What these parents actually need

06. The trip experience

+44%

YoY growth in reviews referencing neurodiverse travelers in Q1

Travel is not one-size-fits-all, and families experience it in very different ways. As conversations about neurodiverse travelers grow across our platform, this study explores the experiences, needs, and behaviors of an important and often overlooked segment—helping us build a more inclusive experience for all travelers.



Guide27807418730

1 contribution



Best Family Vacation

Feb 2025 • Family

We had an amazing time at legoland california. The park, hotel, and grounds are very well set up for engaging kids and keeping them busy. The staff (model citizens, characters, housekeeping, restaurants, & lobby) were all wonderful and helpful. I truly appreciated how everyone made an effort to connect with each kid and make them feel special. As a parent of a **neurodiverse** child, this was a place my kid was fully accepted, celebrated for who he is, and wholly included in activities.



Written March 5, 2025



Sarah D

2 contributions



Second visit

Apr 2025

Fantastic! This was our second visit and we did trapped. Was excellent and so much fun. Good to know that for trapped you will be handcuffed and blindfolded for the start - we didn't know and my daughter who is **neurodivergent** struggled a bit with that because she wasn't prepared for it 😊 will definitely be back again though. Thanks guys

Approach

Market US

Sample 3,153 Census Rep Family Travelers (511 Parents with Neurodiverse Children)

Partner Morning Consult

Field Dates March-April 2026

Neurodivergent families travel just as often as the average family

Family travelers with a neurodivergent child, travel just as frequently the average family in the US. 82% taking 2+ trips/year.

Take 2+ trips per year:



The motivations look familiar at first glance, but they are a little less driven by making memories with family



Top reasons Neurodivergent parents travel:

33%

making memories

32%

relaxing

30%

visit family or friends

28%

exposing their kids to new places



The planning process

Planning is more intensive, more sourced, and more centralized 48%

consult 5+ sources before booking

42%

spend up to 5 days researching



The shift

They have moved away from "Family & Friends" (dropping 10 points) and toward social media and forums to find "their people" who won't judge their reality.



Social media

The #1 source for Neurodivergent parents (46%)

AI tools

34% of Neurodivergent parents, vs. 30% overall

Online forums

29% (21% higher than the overall sample)

Friends & family

38% among Neurodivergent parents, vs. 48% overall



Planning responsibility lands more heavily on one person

89%

of Neurodivergent parents say one person leads planning (vs. 83% overall)

And kids have a louder voice in the planning 43%

are "very involved" in planning
(vs. 35% overall)



Predictability is the parent's best friend

The strategy

When picking where to go, Neurodivergent parents lean harder on places they already know.

20% almost always return to the same spot (*a 67% jump over overall parents*)

61% of Neurodivergent parents list destination familiarity as important when selecting a destination vs. 51% overall

The logic

Familiarity isn't a lack of adventure; it's a strategic choice to lower the parent's own anxiety and the child's sensory load.

Outsized spending aligns with experience control

Outdoor Trips

33% of families with a neurodivergent child spend \$2k+ on outdoor trips, 32% higher than the average family traveler

Theme Park

41% of families with a neurodivergent child spend \$2k+ on theme park trips, 21% higher than the average family traveler

Road trips

39% of families with a neurodivergent child spend \$2k+ on road trips, 34% higher than the average family traveler





The importance of flexibility

Neurodivergent families are far more likely to have a trip cancelled or cut short

38%

of Neurodivergent parents have never cancelled or cut short a family trip — compared to 57% of the full sample (a 19-point gap)

23%

have experienced *both* a pre-departure cancellation and an early return, vs. 15% overall





The reason for those disruptions look different too

17%

Child-related challenges

12% overall

14%

Logistics & travel disruptions

7% overall

12%

Work conflicts

15% overall

Control matters

Flexible cancellation matters more:

- 50% more likely to list flexible cancellation policies as important for accommodation choices



Like in transportation choices

57% Airplane (vs 63%)

22% Train (vs 17%)

20% Bus (vs 14%)

14% RV/Campervan (vs 12%)



And accommodations

Neurodivergent families are notably less likely to default to a standard hotel and more likely to pick lodging that gives them control or feels like home.

69%

Hotel (vs 79%)

44%

Staying with family or friends (vs 38%)

27%

B&B (vs 21%)

28%

Campground/RV park (vs 23%)



Kitchen and cooking facilities matter more (30% rate it "extremely important" vs. 24%).



The emotional dissonance

Financial pressure is real

93%

of Neurodivergent parents agree they'd travel more if finances allowed; 64% **strongly** agree (vs. 56% overall)

58%

Rate cost as "extremely important" (vs. 53%)

32%

Place more weight on distance from home (vs. 25%)

39%

Ease of getting there (vs. 34%)



The pre-trip emotional landscape is complicated

30%

are "very excited" before a trip

25%

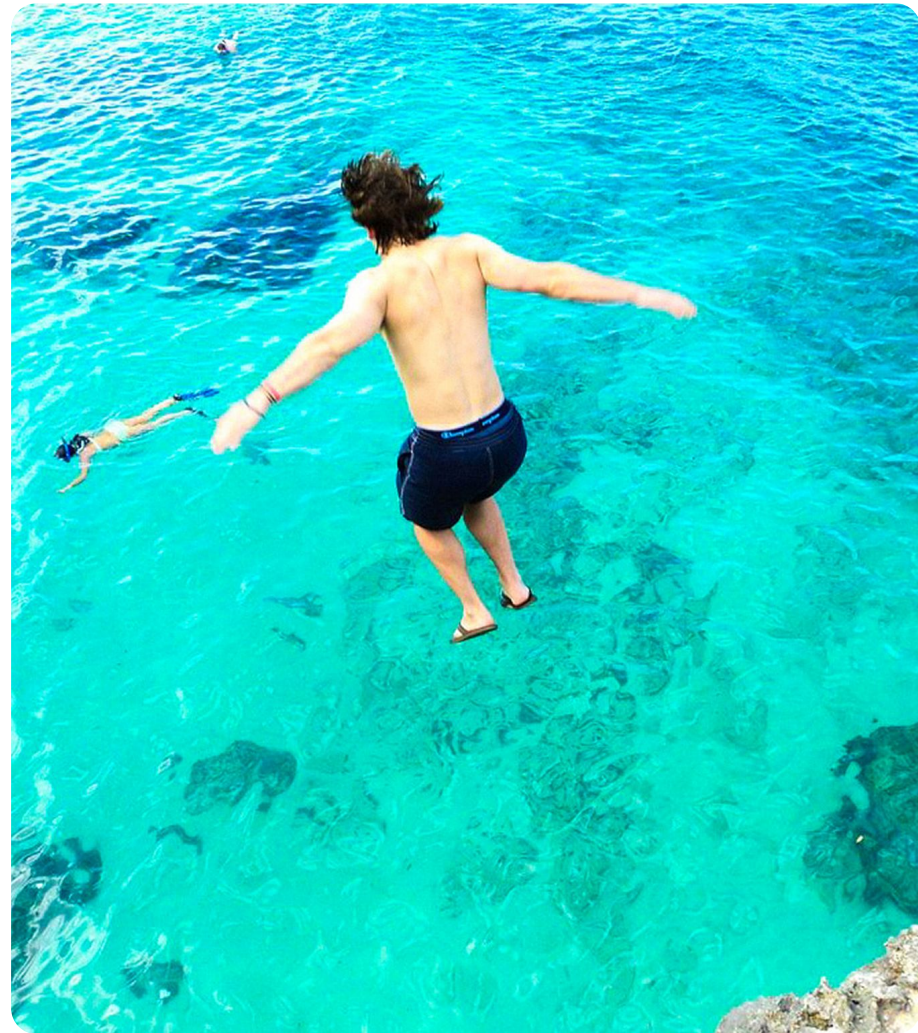
are "mostly excited with some stress"

27%

feel a true mix of excitement & anxiety

18%

feel mostly anxious heading in to a trip



And post-trip recovery is needed



26%

of Neurodivergent parents feel "**fully restored**" after a trip

40%

feel "**mostly restored**"

17%

are **neutral**

18%

come back **depleted**

The drivers of their mental load

45%

Emotional demands of supporting the child

44%

The mental load of planning

44%

The lack of personal time or space

37%

The effort of managing needs in public

29%

The emotional labor of advocating with staff

26%

Worrying about how their child's behavior is perceived

15%

Feeling unsupported by travel providers

Two things can be true

- 83% Look forward to family travel
- 82% Feel proud of what their family has achieved through travel
- 81% Say their child's diagnosis has made them a more thoughtful traveler

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- 61% Say family trips are often more work than they're worth
 - 61% Find it hard to relax
 - 69% Feel envious of families who seem to travel more easily
 - 62% Feel travel is a luxury that isn't really designed for families like theirs





What these parents actually need

The struggle



The solution

The industry shows up inconsistently



43%

see industry efforts as genuine but the majority do not

Families need true, consistent support—not performative.

27%

See industry efforts as hit or miss

12%

See them as mostly performative

11%

Think they are completely performative

8%

Aren't aware of any efforts at all

More time, more space, & more trust

32% Shorter wait times and queue alternatives

26% More accommodation options with space & privacy

25% Staff trained to understand and support

24% Peer reviews from other Neurodivergent families





Creating a more human experience

32%

Accommodations designed with genuine understanding

31%

Accommodations with quiet space available

30%

Feeling welcomed and not judged

29%

Staff proactively checking in

29%

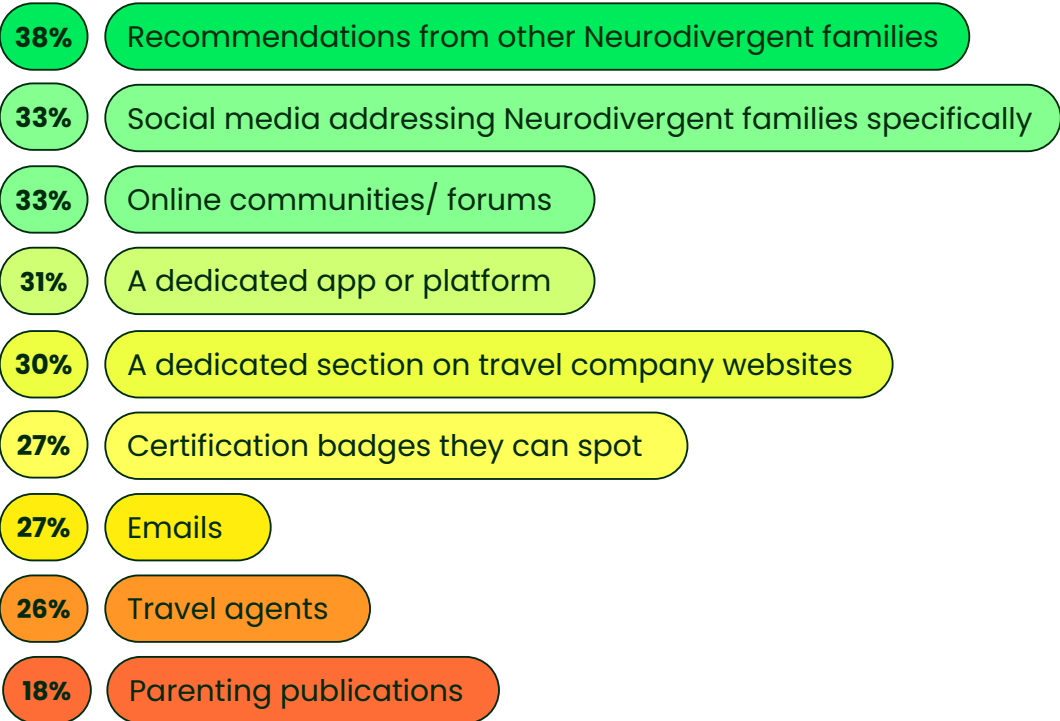
Being able to communicate needs discreetly

24%

Want to not have to repeatedly explain their needs

Peer & community sources are their main source of trust

Where neurodivergent families **want to learn about resources:**



Extra support is preferred & common

29%

prefer traveling with extra adults
vs. 22% overall





The trip experience

Preparation is the foundation for the trip, leaning on a consistent toolkit

38%

Bringing comfort items and sensory tools

36%

Carrying familiar food/snacks

34%

Preparing children in advance with detailed information

28%

Travel during off-peak periods

26%

Choose accommodations with extra space

25%

Deliberately build in dedicated downtime

70%

of Neurodivergent parents have requested some kind of special accommodation from a travel provider

However, only

19%

use formal disability access programs

Awareness or accessibility of formal programs seems to lag behind the informal workarounds parents have built themselves.



However, most trips are seen as positive

For the children,

68%

of Neurodivergent parents describe **their child's typical trip experience as very or mostly positive**

21%

Say it's mixed

10%

Say it's mostly or very difficult

And it's very similar for the parents,

69%

of Neurodivergent parents describe **their trip experience as very or mostly positive**

12%

Say it's mostly or very stressful

and in the end, the payoff is unmatched

- 78% say travel has produced a stronger sense of connection and closeness "a great deal" or "quite a bit"
- 76% report joy and fun that makes the effort worthwhile
- 78% feel a sense of accomplishment after successfully navigating a trip
- 75% see their child developing independence and resilience through travel
- 74% see their child gaining confidence in new situations





Thank you.

Tripadvisor