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Challenges & Delights: Amusement Parks Work for Disabled Kids

Donna G. Albrecht, Medical Writer

Introduction

The mere mention of roller coasters and tilt-a-whirls conjures up excitement in children. But if you think this sort of fun isn't available to [children with disabilities](#), you'd be wrong.

"Part of our philosophy of bringing up our children is that we try to give them as many normal opportunities as possible," says Jill Tatz, developmental therapist and mother of two children with [multiple disabilities](#). "Going to an amusement park is one of those normal opportunities. So we let them experience as much as we think we can safely let them experience."

The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA) estimates that the odds of being hurt seriously enough to need hospitalization are only one in 25 million. But how do you keep *your* child safe?

Get Ready, Get Set

Once you've decided to visit a particular park, check out their Web site. (Many can be found through <http://www.americanmidway.com/>.) Often, you can click through to contact the park directly and ask about their accommodations for people with disabilities. Some parks like Dollywood (www.dollywood.com/Guest_Disabled5.htm) list the rides and show how accessible they consider them to be. You can request brochures in the mail to help you plan your day.

The park brochure may not include enough accessibility information for you to know which rides are absolutely safe for your child. Also, minimum height requirements for the rides might not be a measure of safety for children with particular disabilities. That's why you should ask your child's doctor or physical therapist:

- Are there any kinds of rides that would be unsafe for my child?
- Are there any kinds of rides where my child should have an adult holding them?
- Are any rides likely to cause problems?
- Are there any other restrictions I should put on my child's activities at the park?

Pediatric neurologist Jean C. Hayward in Oakland, California, tells families to use common sense. For example, a child who has poor muscle tone should not go on a ride that spins quickly or goes upside down even if they are the required size and are wearing a harness. Low muscle tone in the trunk can cause these children to slump over, making the harness ineffective.

She notes that some active, (but not upside-down) rides may be safe if a strong adult is sitting right next to the child on a bench seat and can hold on to him. Rides where each person has a separate seat, however, are more likely to be a problem, she says. This is also important for children with seizure disorders in case a seizure starts during the ride. Tatz notes that when the child is a teen, it is not "cool" to be seen riding with their parents, so it can be a great idea (and add to the fun) if helpful family friends come along.

For patients with disabilities that make it difficult to wait in line, Dr. Hayward prepares a letter asking the park for accommodations. Your doctor might do the same for you.

UCLA recreational therapist Stacy Nonoguchi suggests another way parents can evaluate a thrill ride. They can ask themselves: If the ride were to break down (maybe the roller coaster gets stuck at the top), would it be especially difficult to get my child off safely?

Most important, if the park says that it is not safe for your child (disabled or not) to go on a particular ride, believe them. *USA Today* reported that on July 1, 2000, 3-year-old Shelby Kukich died when her mother ignored safety signs at a go-kart park and placed her daughter on her lap as she drove. When the go-kart collided with another, Shelby was crushed between her mom and the steering wheel.

Fun in the Sun

Nonoguchi mentions that on sunny days, children with disabilities can become too warm. This can lead to heat exhaustion or sunstroke. Be sure they (and everyone else in the family)

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Wear hats and frequently apply sunscreen.
- Spend time in air-conditioned performance areas and shops.

If your child becomes unusually pale, disoriented, or doesn't seem to be sweating normally, get out of the sun immediately. Have a park employee call first aid or call 911 yourself. You should check the location of the first aid office when you enter the park.

Finally, Dr. Hayward notes that common sense is the most important thing you bring to the amusement park. Parents know their child's limitations and need to choose activities accordingly. Nonoguchi adds that parents should "Prepare, prepare, prepare. Then try to let go and let the kids have some fun!"

What To Pack

Your day at the park will be more fun if you bring the right things with you. Use this checklist to be sure you don't forget anything!

- Medications you'll need while you're there. If any require refrigeration, check ahead with the park about using the refrigerator in the first aid office.
- Special foods if your child is on a particular diet and may not be able to get the right foods at the park. If they need refrigeration, again, check with the park.
- Medical plan identification card (even though you aren't likely to need it).
- Name and phone number for your child's physician.
- List of medications your child takes.
- Letter from doctor (if necessary) to get handicapped accommodations.
- Sunscreen.
- Hat.
- Sweater.

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