



Connected Travel



BEYOND THE BROCHURE

# A GUIDE FOR NEURODIVERGENT FAMILIES TRAVELLING FROM MELBOURNE AIRPORT

*An example of thoughtful travel planning  
for neurodivergent families.*

Prepared by  
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Connected Travel



# WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

Airports can involve a lot of steps, transitions, waiting and unfamiliar environments — all of which can affect how confidently a neurodivergent child and their family move through the journey.

This guide has been created to help families understand what travelling through Melbourne Airport may look like, including available accessibility supports, hidden disability initiatives and practical considerations for each stage of the airport experience.

It has been developed with input from May Lee, Paediatric Occupational Therapist at Hope Kids, and Jennifer Winstone, Speech Therapist and Co-Founder of MyComms, to support families preparing to travel from Sydney.

The aim is not to remove every uncertainty, but to make the airport experience feel more predictable and help families plan for their child's individual needs before travel day.

For children who benefit from more detailed preparation, my Children's Airport Preparation Booklet provides interactive activities to help them explore the different stages of an airport journey before they leave home.

This guide may also be shared by therapists and other professionals supporting families as they prepare for travel.



Scan to access my printable Children's Airport Preparation Booklet, with activities that help make each stage feel more familiar.





# DEPARTING FROM MELBOURNE AIRPORT

## Accessibility & Hidden Disability Support

Melbourne Airport can feel loud, busy and unpredictable — especially during peak travel times. For many neurodivergent children, the transition from car to check-in, to security can be the most overwhelming part of the holiday.

Knowing what supports are available — and planning ahead where possible — can make a significant difference to how the day unfolds.

The information below brings together practical accessibility options and hidden disability supports available at Melbourne Airport.

## HIDDEN ACCESSIBILITY SUNFLOWER PROGRAM

The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a discreet way to indicate that a traveller may need additional understanding or support.

Wearing a sunflower lanyard at Melbourne Airport can help staff recognise when extra time, guidance or patience may be helpful.

Staff may assist with:

- Directing families to special assistance lanes
- Allowing additional time at screening

The lanyard does not fast-track security or passport control.

### Planning Tip

Discuss the sunflower lanyard with your child beforehand so they understand what it means and how it may be used.  
Allow extra time on arrival at the airport to collect one if needed.

## PRE PLANNING TOOLS

Preparing your child for what the airport will look and feel like can reduce uncertainty and support smoother transitions on the day of travel.

### **Sensory Maps**

Melbourne Airport provides sensory maps to help families understand the sensory environment within each terminal. These maps can help you: Identify busier, higher-noise areas (e.g. food courts, security zones) Locate quieter spaces within the terminal Anticipate transitions that may be challenging.

Sensory Maps can be downloaded on [Melbourne Airports website](#).

### **Social Story Resources**

Melbourne Airport provides written social stories to help travellers understand what to expect during their airport journey.

These resources outline each stage of the process — including arrivals, departures and moving through the terminal — helping families prepare for the experience in advance.

You can view or [download the social story here](#)

\*note whilst this story is focused on International Departures it still has plenty of relevant and helpful information related to Domestic Travel.

### **Occupational Therapy Insight - By May Lee**

*Preparation: helping your child know what to expect*

Preparation is one of the most helpful things you can do, but it is not just about telling your child what will happen. It helps to walk through the experience step by step in a way that feels concrete. Instead of only explaining what will happen, aim to help your child see it, feel it and practice it.

## BOARDING & AIRLINE SUPPORT

Some airlines operating from Melbourne Airport recognise the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program and may incorporate it into their assistance or early boarding processes.

Families may wish to:

- Speak with staff at the gate prior to boarding
- Ask whether early boarding is available

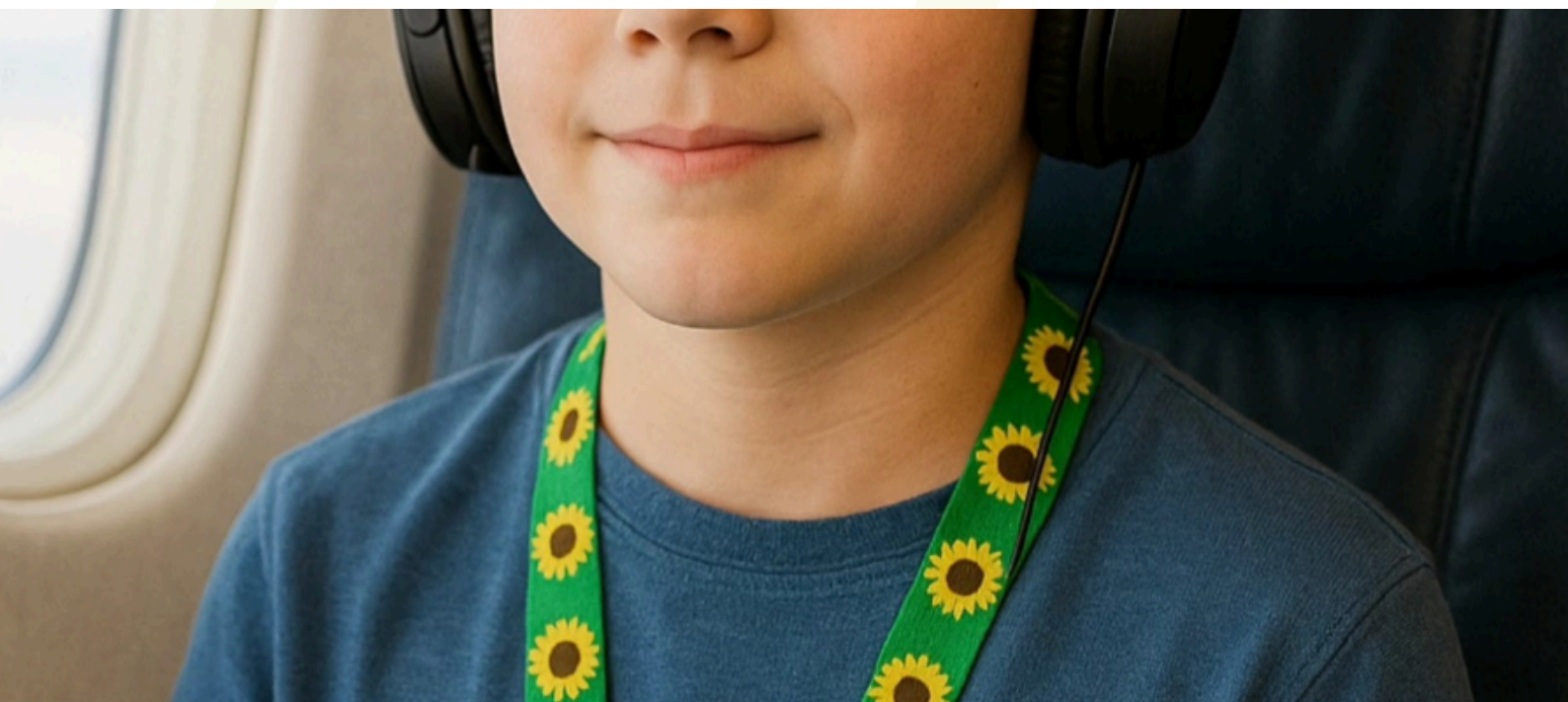
Early boarding can allow additional time to settle into seats, store belongings and prepare children before the cabin becomes busier.

### Planning Tip

Consider packing carry-on items that support comfort and regulation during the flight, such as:

- Downloaded shows or apps (in case Wi-Fi is unavailable)
- Familiar snacks
- Fidget tools or comfort items
- Noise-cancelling headphones

A small “toolkit” does not need to be complicated, but it should be easy to access and familiar to your child. Think of this as your portable regulation kit.



# BEFORE YOU TRAVEL

## Occupational Therapy Tips

By May Lee, Paediatric Occupational Therapist



### BUILD A SIMPLE TRAVEL STORY

Walk your child through the journey step by step. You might say: "First we drive to the airport → then we wait → then we go on the plane → then we have snacks"

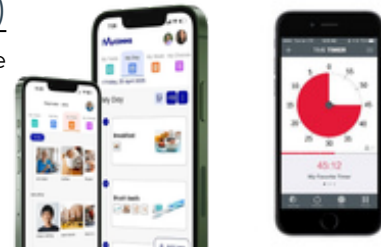
You can support this with:

- photos of airports or planes
- a first then visual aid
- a visual schedule

### USE VISUAL SUPPORTS (HIGH IMPACT)

Tools such as visual schedules, timers or apps like Time Timer/MyComms can help your child:

- understand what is happening
- express needs (e.g. "break", "toilet", "too loud")
- manage time and transitions



### PRACTICE KEY TRAVEL SKILLS AHEAD OF TIME

Focus on small, relevant skills such as:

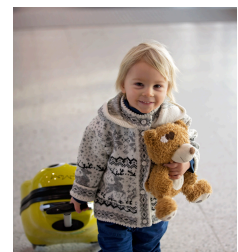
- sitting for short periods
- waiting with a timer
- wearing headphones
- carrying a small backpack

These small practices can make a big difference on the day.

### GIVE YOUR CHILD SOME CONTROL

Travel can feel unpredictable. Giving small choices helps your child feel more secure. Examples:

- "Do you want this snack or that snack?"
- "Do you want to carry your bag or hold my hand?"

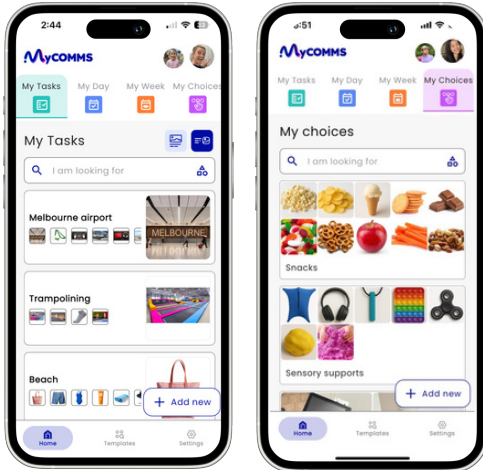


**OT TIP** : Show visual aids instead of repeating long verbal instructions to allow processing time and prevent information or sensory overload.

# SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION DURING TRAVEL

## Speech Therapy Insights

By Jennifer Winstone, Paediatric Speech Therapist



### BEFORE YOU TRAVEL: BUILDING FAMILIARITY WITH VISUALS

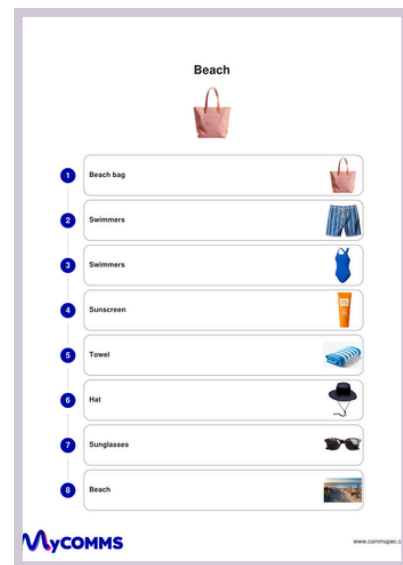
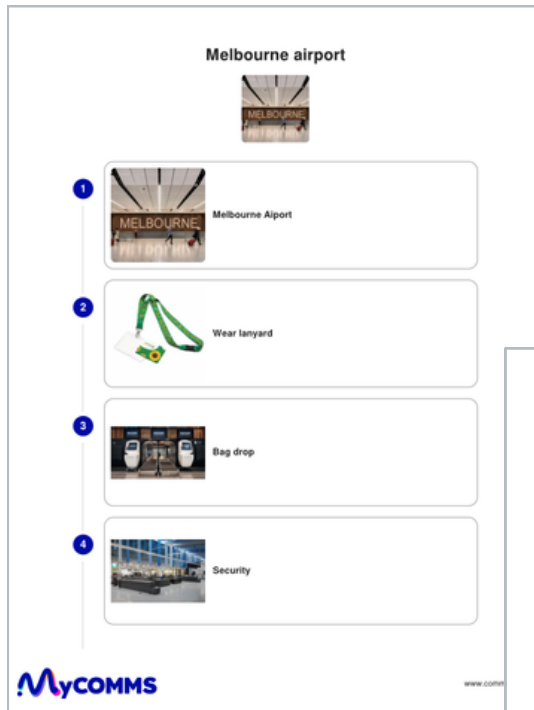
Visual supports are most effective when they are part of everyday routines, not something new introduced during travel. Building familiarity beforehand can support understanding and reduce load in new environments.

### MAKING VISUALS MORE MEANINGFUL

Using real photos from a child's own environment, for example their suitcase, the car, or where they are staying, can make information easier to recognise and connect with, especially when preparing for unfamiliar places.

### DURING TRANSITIONS AND WAITING

Visual supports can help make waiting more predictable by showing what is happening now, what comes next and when the wait will end.

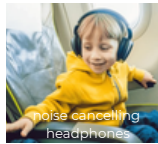


# CREATE A SENSORY TOOLKIT

## Occupational Therapy Tips

By May Lee, Paediatric Occupational Therapist

### AUDITORY SUPPORT (SOUND & NOISE)



Noise cancelling headphones



Ear plugs



Ear muffs

**What to pack:** Noise-cancelling headphones, earplugs

**How to use:** Put headphones on before entering noisy spaces, such as during airport announcements, boarding & takeoff.

You can also play familiar or calming music or songs

**You might say:** "It's going to get loud soon, let's put your headphones on"

### TACTILE SUPPORT (TOUCH & MOVEMENT)



**What to pack:** Fidget toys, stress balls, tangles or textured items

**How to use:** You may offer these items while waiting in line, sitting on your plane seat or waiting to disembark the plane

**You might say:** "Your hands can stay busy while we wait"

### PROPRIOCEPTIVE SUPPORT (BODY INPUT)



**What to pack:** Weighted lap pad or soft toy, squeeze fidget, playdough

**How to use:** Offer these during long sitting periods, when your child is restless or overwhelmed.

**You might say:** "Push your feet into the ground" "Squeeze this tight and let go"

### VISUAL SUPPORT (COMMUNICATION & PREDICTABILITY)

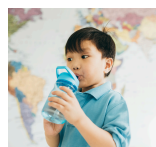


**What to pack:** Visual schedule, first-then cards, timer, communication apps (e.g. MyComms), favourite book

**How to use:** Show what's happening next instead of repeating instructions -Use "First → Then"

**You might say:** "First security → then snack"

### ORAL SUPPORTS (TASTE & TEXTURE)

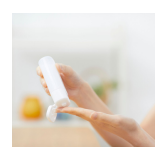


**What to pack:** Crunchy snacks (e.g. crackers, pretzels), chewy foods (e.g. muesli bars, dried fruit), chewy tube / oral chew, water bottle or straw bottle, sour lollies or flavoured snacks (if appropriate)

**How to use:** During long waiting times (airport, plane, car), when your child is seeking input (chewing, mouthing items)

**You might say:** "Take a big crunchy bite" "Let's have a sip of water through your straw" "Do you want to chew on this while we wait?"

### OLFACTORY SUPPORT (CALMING SMELL)



**What to pack:** Familiar scents (e.g. essential oil roller, scented balm), scented wipes or tissues, favourite lotion or lip balm, small item from home with a familiar smell (e.g. soft toy, blanket)

**How to use:** Helpful in strong-smelling environments (toilets, food courts). During transitions or unfamiliar environments. When your child feels anxious, unsettled, or overwhelmed

**You might say:** "Let's smell your calming scent" "Take a slow breath in through your nose" "Does this smell like home?"



# PLANNING YOUR NEXT HOLIDAY?

This guide reflects the level of research and preparation I provide when planning and booking travel for families.

As a Neurodivergent Family Travel Specialist, I support families by designing holidays that consider each child's needs — from destination and accommodation through to how the experience will feel day to day, informed by both professional training and lived experience.

Services can include:

- Destination and attraction recommendations
- Accommodation selection tailored to family needs
- Accessibility and hidden disability support guidance
- Pre-travel preparation resources

If you would like support planning and booking your next holiday, I'd love to help.

## Jade Sharp

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I am a Travel Advisor with Connected Travel, an Australian travel network and member of the Australian Travel Industry Association (ATIA), providing the confidence of working within an established and accredited network.

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Scan to access helpful travel resources and future guides for neurodivergent families.



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[jadesharptravel.com.au](http://jadesharptravel.com.au)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the valuable contributions of May Lee, Paediatric Occupational Therapist and Director of Hope Kids OT, and Jennifer Winstone, Speech Therapist and Co-Founder of MyComms.

Their insights have contributed to the practical strategies and supports included throughout this guide.



May Lee  
Paediatric Occupational Therapist  
Director, Hope Kids OT



Jennifer Winstone  
Speech Therapist  
Co-Founder MyComms

## SHARING THIS GUIDE

This guide has been created as a complimentary resource to support neurodivergent families travelling from Melbourne.

Therapists, educators and professionals supporting families are welcome to share this guide with clients who may find it helpful.

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