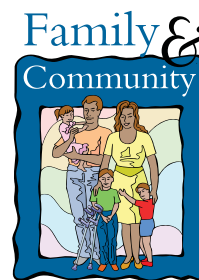


Strategies to Help Children with Special Needs Enjoy Successful Community Outings

By Alan Harchik, PhD, BCBA, and Patricia Ladew



Even the most uneventful days at home can be challenging for families who have a child with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or another developmental disability. The challenges multiply when parents or caregivers take the child to a dentist or doctor's appointment, the grocery store, or on another outing into the community. For military families, periodic relocations often require frequent readjustments to unfamiliar people and routines and to new and different community settings.

"It's tough, because we move every couple of years," says Xiomara Grant, who lives in Austell, GA, with her husband, David, a Major in the Army, and their 7-year-old son, David Jr., who was diagnosed with autism when he was 18 months old. Before moving to Georgia, the Grants lived in Kansas and New York.

For Xiomara and David, taking young David out into the community for medical and dental appointments, haircuts, and shopping trips can be difficult. "When we're headed for the dentist, David knows, and he doesn't like it," Xiomara says. "He gets scared and cries." David has good reason for not liking the dentist. He has had to be sedated and strapped into the dentist's chair for dental procedures. "I don't take him to the barbershop anymore because he always cries there, too," adds Xiomara. "I cut his hair myself."

Seemingly routine activities such as medical and dental office appointments, grocery shopping, and even visits to the barber or hairdresser may be extremely uncomfortable for a child with heightened sensitivities. In these kinds of situations, a child with special needs may exhibit behavior

problems such as tantrums, aggression, and toilet accidents.

For David's parents, outings to the mall have also been problematic because David loves to lie down on the cool, marbled floors of the big department stores or run up and down the aisles. "It's a sensory thing with him," explains Xiomara. "He unbuttons his shirt and runs so it flies out behind him like a Superman cape. With the holiday season coming, I'm just not going to take him to the mall."

Making Choices That Make Sense

Given the chaos and crowds of a mall during the holidays, Xiomara is making smart choices about which outings make sense for David.

But if families avoid regular appointments and community outings because of a child's negative responses, that child may learn to use problem behaviors to escape these situations. More importantly, the child will not have the opportunity to learn new skills and integrate successfully into his or her community and family life.

David and Xiomara have worked hard to understand young David's needs, create routines, and teach him useful skills. Their goal is for David to have positive experiences in the community and be exposed to people and places in much the same way a typical child would be.

Professionals at May Institute, a national network of educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral health services for individuals with special needs, have had great success with a number of research-based methods that can help parents like Xiomara and David make their child's community experiences good ones.

Creating Successful Outings

One method that helps create more successful outings is desensitization. It means gradually exposing the child to a situation or setting that is prob-



The Grant family has fun with Santa during the holiday season. Pictured are: Mom, Xiomara (l), David Jr., sitting on Santa's lap, and dad, David, looking on.

Community Outings

lematic. If a child has difficulty with going to the dentist, for example, parents might start with short, frequent visits that end with a reward such as a preferred activity or a favorite toy.

The appointment can be broken down into a sequence of steps. Have the child complete only the first step on the first visit. On the next visit, try to complete the first two steps, and so on.

Many physicians, dentists, and hair-stylists are patient and willing to work with children and families once they understand that a child has special needs. As parents and others learn methods to help children become more comfortable in challenging situations, everyday tasks can become manageable and even enjoyable.

"The last time we went to the dentist, David was really good," says Xiomara. "He loves *Dora the Explorer* DVDs, and he was able to watch one while we were there. That made it easier for him to have his cleaning."

Success At the Supermarket

David and his parents have also enjoyed more successful trips to the supermarket lately, thanks in part to some new strategies they have learned from David's behavior analyst, Meghan Holligan-Whitney, BCABA (Board Certified Associate Behavior Analyst), who works out of May Institute's Atlanta office.

"David was having severe elope-

Before You Head Out...

A little advance planning goes a long way toward ensuring successful community outings for children with special needs. Behavior specialists at May Institute offer parents the following tips:

- Teach the child about the situation in advance of the visit. Parents or caregivers might make a book with photos of someone the child knows going through all of the steps of the activity in the actual setting, including receiving the treat at the end of the activity. An alternative would be to make a video for the child to watch.
- Create a simulated, pretend situation before the actual outing. Research suggests that if the situation is made realistic, it can result in improved behavior in the real setting. Simulation allows for many more practice opportunities before the actual outing.
- Gradually expose the child to a situation or setting that is problematic (also known as desensitization). Over time, the child will usually become more comfortable in that situation or setting.
- Make changes to the environment to make it feel more comfortable or safe for the child. During a doctor's visit, for example, let her sit on your lap or hold a favorite item or toy, or talk together about a favorite topic. It can also be helpful to explain to the child what will happen next, or encourage her to hold some special item, such as a stethoscope, prior to its use.

ment issues, meaning he would run away from his parents when he was out in public," says Meghan. "He loves puzzles, so I take a puzzle with me when I take David to the grocery store. For every 30 seconds he stays with me and doesn't leave my side, I give him a puzzle piece, which he puts in a little bucket. At the end of our shopping trip, we go to the car, and he gets to put his puzzle together. That's his reward."

Using this technique, Meghan has helped David learn to stay by her side. "His elopement episodes have gone from eight per store visit to one," she says. Now she's working with David's parents to help them implement this successful method.

Meghan also encouraged David to get young David more involved in the process of grocery shopping. It's a suggestion that has worked well. "I have him hold the basket if it's not too heavy," says David. "And, after we check out, I let him carry one of the bags back to the car. That makes him feel good because he's part of the process. He's a big help."

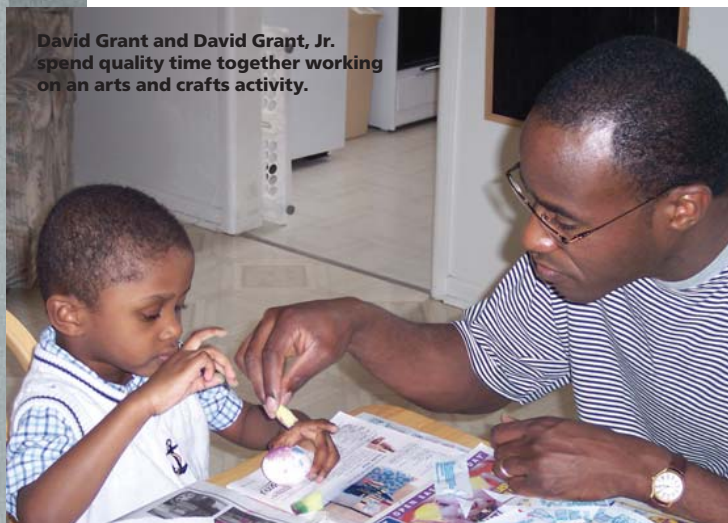
Planning, Practice, and Praise

For most children, learning "supermarket skills" should begin with practice settings at home or in school before moving on to a small grocery or convenience store. The child should be able to follow a number of basic instructions such as "come here," "stop," "hold my hand," and "wait in line with me" in a more controlled environment before visiting a larger supermarket.

"There are a lot of stimuli in a supermarket, so it's important to plan ahead to ensure success," advises Jack Stokes, MSEd, BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst), Director of Residential Services for May Institute in Randolph, Massachusetts. Jack and his staff work with the students in their care on developing the skills that will help them to take successful trips to the supermarket. He recommends the following:

- Set a time limit for your outing.
- Be sure you know where the bathroom and all the exits are located before you take your child to the store.
- Pick a time when the store is not likely to be crowded.
- Have activities and small rewards or "reinforcers" with you.

"When thinking about rewards, remember to use verbal praise and to be very specific," Jack advises. "Don't just tell your child he or she is being



David Grant and David Grant, Jr. spend quality time together working on an arts and crafts activity.

Creating Happier Holidays

The holiday season can be a joyful time—a time for getting together with friends and family, exchanging visits and gifts, enjoying fabulous feasts, and attending parties. Changes in routine, numerous social obligations, and unrealistic expectations can also make it a stressful time, especially for families who have children with special needs.

In the midst of so much activity and change, parents should make consistency a priority. They should make it clear to their child that even though this is an exciting time and regular routines are changing, they expect him or her to continue to use clear communication and work on activities of daily living such as dressing and eating. Likewise, family members should be consistent in their responses to problem behaviors.

It is best to try to intervene early, before a behavior problem escalates, and also to try to use positive rewards for following instructions and other desirable behaviors. Have plenty of the child's favorite items, such as preferred foods, toys, and DVDs available to reinforce good behavior. Some other things to consider around the holiday season include:

Routines. Holidays often require changes in daily and weekly schedules. Schools have days off, after-school activities may be altered or canceled, and new or temporary activities might be added. Parents and caregivers can address these changes with children by using picture schedules throughout the day or week, and by including lots of positive preferred activities and rewards on a regular basis.

Shopping. If your child accompanies you to the mall, supermarket, or department store, try to go early in the day or during the midweek when it is likely to be less crowded. To ensure greater success, plan shorter trips. Be sure to use small rewards during and after a successful trip.

Family gatherings. Getting together for family gatherings can present some of the most stressful challenges of the season. You can prepare in a number of ways. Get out photos from previous gatherings and talk with your child about the names of people who will be attending this year's get-together. If you will be going to someone else's home, you may be able to get photos of the house and guests beforehand.

Work on social greetings and conversation skills at home, depending upon your child's verbal ability. Bring along favorite videos and toys to make the experience as positive as possible. Find out if there is a quiet area in the home you will be visiting where you can take your child if necessary.

You can try to find out about details of the gathering that are important to your child, such as the seating plans for the table, the planned menu, and if there will be any dogs or cats in the home. For some children, it is better to bring along their favorite food and/or to eat at home before heading out. In many cases, it is better to get to the gathering early because it is easier for the child to be there first, before many of the guests arrive. Make family and friends aware of what to expect from your child, both positive and challenging. This can be done by telephone, via e-mail, or with a short note.

Travel. Many children with autism and other developmental disabilities enjoy riding in the car. Most families have determined the best way to travel by car, including what to bring along and how often to stop. Airline travel, however, can be particularly difficult. Some parents have found it helpful to contact the airline a few weeks prior to the flight to find out about special boarding procedures for families with children with disabilities or other assistance that can be provided.

'good.' Say, 'I like how patiently you are waiting in line.' It's a good rule of thumb to reinforce good behavior every 30 to 40 seconds with specific verbal praise."

Addressing Problem Behaviors

Developing a plan to address problem behaviors that may happen during an outing is also important, according to Jack. "Things happen," he says. "You won't always be 100 percent successful. You need to plan ahead so you can quickly and safely get your child out of the supermarket if you need to. Be prepared to abandon a cart of groceries and walk out of the store if your child is out of control."

Once the child masters some basic skills, the supermarket experience will be much more positive. Then, he or she can learn more advanced skills such as making and using a shopping list, locating one or more items from the list, pushing the cart appropriately, asking for help from a store employee, and mastering counting and other money skills.

Planning, practice, and praise pay off. After a child has developed a new set of skills, he or she will be able to use those skills in a variety of new situations and settings.

Reaping the Rewards

David and Xiomara Grant have witnessed firsthand that ongoing and intensive support can help a child with special needs make great strides. With some pride, David recounts a recent visit to the home of his boss.

"My son had never been there before, and he wanted to explore," he said. "So my boss walked David upstairs and downstairs so David could satisfy his curiosity."

"He didn't run around," David continued. "He just wanted to explore the house. It was a totally new place with new people. He didn't cause any disruption. It was a fine night out with people he had never met before in a location he had never been before."

Teaching a child the necessary skills to navigate new and challenging situations outside the home will help that child be more independent, happier, and better able to function in the world. With careful planning and a lot of patience and love, community outings can be enjoyable for you and your child. •

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