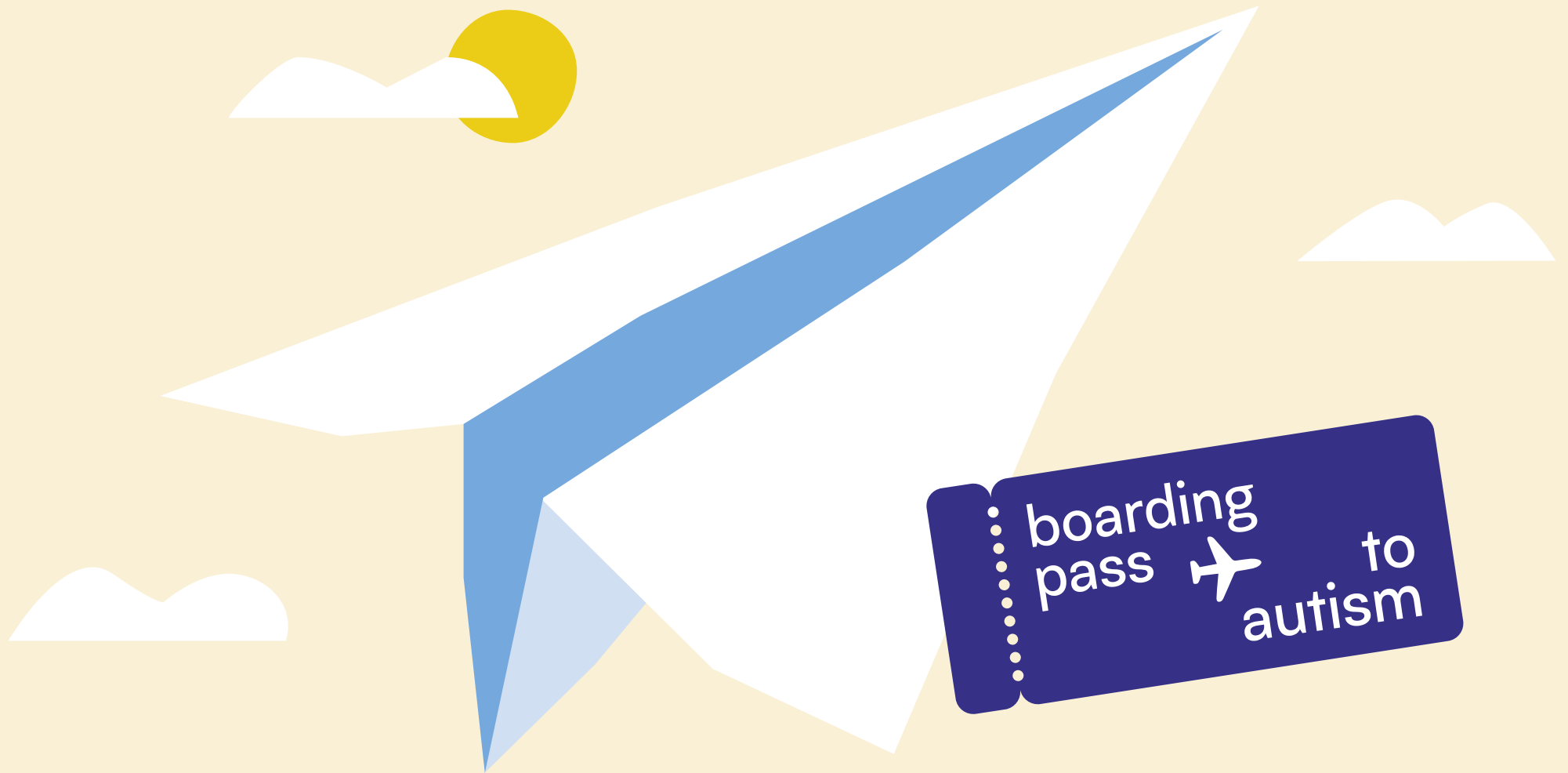


Flight procedures desensitization program for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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EDUCATION



Aims of the flight desensitization program for people with ASD

Although air travel is considered ordinary and unremarkable for most individuals, **it continues to constitute an “event”** for people with autism spectrum disorder in a number of ways: it involves a break from routine and entails travelling to the airport, which provides ample potential for unexpected deviations (e.g. traffic jams, public transport delays etc.). Moreover, airports are stressful places (consider the electronic arrivals and departures boards, the noise, the constant moving from one place to another, the waiting and delays). And, finally, at the end of it all, all we have to look forward to is a claustrophobic plane cabin with lots of people packed into a limited space, being requested to strap themselves into our seats for take-off and landing, which aren't always the easiest on our senses, and a flight that can be tough in itself if the plane runs into turbulence! Needless to say, you don't have to have autism to be worried about flying!

A lot of people without ASD have a fear of flying. Nonetheless, the sensory sensitivities and higher susceptibility to stress that typify people with ASD can lead to a particular aversion to air travel.

The air travel procedures simulation for children with ASD aims to desensitize them to the different factors involved in preparing for a flight. The desensitization will be achieved by means of a **program** designed to systematically **train** and **familiarize** the children, their parents and therapists with the procedures needed in preparing for a flight, from arriving at the airport to boarding an actual aircraft and fastening seat-belts. The “Boarding Pass to Autism” educational program was created by the **Onassis Foundation** in association with **Athens International Airport “Eleftherios Venizelos”**, where the final phase of the desensitization program was staged under the academic aegis of **Athens University**—under the supervision of Professor Aggeliki Gena of that University—and with the support of **AEGEAN Airlines**.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella diagnosis for individuals who can be very different from one another. Some may be highly intelligent but face social and emotional difficulties, while others may display problems in behaviour, learning, communication and language use and may find it hard to process sensory information. While it is possible to spot specific ASD characteristics in some people immediately, this is not always the case. What is certain is that people with ASD face difficulties on multiple levels including **managing stress, processing sensory information, communicating, understanding** speech and social conventions, and expressing and regulating their emotions: difficulties which pose a significant burden on the person experiencing them, even when they are not obvious to outside observers. When the difficulties escalate in an environment that is not enabling for individuals with ASD, they may manifest extreme reactions including **anger outbursts** and **self-harm**.

Sensory difficulties & Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Our senses play a vital role in how we perceive and learn about our surroundings and these perceptions impact in turn on our emotions, our behaviour, and even the way in which we communicate with others. Sensory processing refers to the individual's ability to **experience, understand and organize sensory stimuli** provided by their body and their environment.

Many individuals with ASD experience sensory sensitivity and difficulties processing stimuli from **one or more of their senses** (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, balance, body awareness). Specifically, an individual with ASD may, for example, be **under-sensitive** and/or **over-sensitive** to stimuli at different times, resulting in distress, anxiety and even physical pain. These atypical reactions to sensory stimuli can lead to **anti-social behaviours**, but also to a tendency on the part of people with ASD to avoid exposing themselves to a host of conditions which most people consider enjoyable, like break time at school or the children's playground.

The diagnosis of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder has risen at an epidemic rate in recent years, but we are as yet unsure about what lies behind this increase. It is estimated that roughly 1 in 68 children in the general population are currently diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. Fortunately, a percentage of children with ASD do respond extremely positively to timely and intensive interventions by appropriately trained specialists and go on to live perfectly normal lives. The majority will, however, require a degree of support—some even continued support into adulthood—through all the stages of their development. Factors leading to compromised development can include a child's genetic inheritance (severe organic impairment) as well as a lack of adequate educational and therapeutic services for children with ASD.

With its multitude of simultaneous sensory stimuli (bright lights, people rushing around, announcements etc.), an airport can be a particularly complex and demanding environment for a person with ASD.

If they have not been adequately prepared for an environment of this sort, individuals with ASD may become **anxious** and **insecure** as they strive to avoid aggravations by remaining in a state of constant hypervigilance. It is likely that their **behaviour will become unsettled** as a result of this.

Anxiety and ASD

People with ASD experience **intense** anxiety which usually stems from their inability to communicate their needs and to decode social events, but also from their sensory sensitivities. For example, having to participate in social situations and cope with changes in routine, unpredictability and a lack of control over what's happening around them can all stimulate anxiety. The airport surroundings, the flight, the journey and the unfamiliar destination are all conditions which can be intensely stressful for people with ASD.

Anxiety goes hand in hand with **physical symptoms** (such as sweating, stomach cramps and heart palpitations) which can impact negatively on our ability to think and react. The physical symptoms are usually accompanied by negative thoughts, which can overwhelm an individual when under intense stress (e.g. "What will happen if they open my suitcase?", "What will the body search be like?"). Individuals with ASD do not usually communicate their anxiety verbally, but **express their feelings through their behaviour** instead (e.g. in an anger outburst). It is therefore important for us to be understanding and to help them use anxiety management strategies.



What people with ASD find challenging?

1.
Complex concepts.
People who talk a lot
or too quickly.

2.
People who
shout or quarrel.

3.
Surprises,
unexpected situations
and changes to programs.

4.
Understanding
others' thoughts
and feelings.

5.
Certain **tastes**
and **smells**.

6.
Understanding
metaphors and humour;
they understand
things **literally**.

7.
Explaining in words
what is bothering them
or what they need.
That's why
they can sometimes
start to shout or perform
repetitive actions.

8.
Being pressured
into responding quickly
(they need more time
to understand what is
required of them).

9.
Commotion, crowds,
loud noises, loudspeakers,
lights and being touched;
their senses work
differently from yours.

What do individuals with ASD find helpful?

1.

Not being asked to maintain eye contact when they speak to you.

2.

Being spoken to **quietly** with **simple phrases** and easy words.

3.

Knowing in advance **what is going to happen** and what they need to do.

4.

Being told **how you feel**, what you like and what you don't like in simple words.

5. Being asked

what they want to eat.

6.

Being told **simply and specifically** what you would like them to do. Being shown pictures that back up what you're telling them.

7.

People showing understanding; **they cannot communicate like you.**

8.

Patience.

9.

A quiet space.
Dim lighting.

What can I do to help while I am travelling?

If it helps and you can do so, give up **your place** in the queue or your seat on the plane.

If the individual with ASD is doing something you find irritating, **tell them or their carer politely.**

If you can see they are having difficulties expressing themselves, keep calm, **avoid persistent eye contact** with the individual and/or their carer, and **avoid giving advice** or making suggestions and comments to the individual with ASD and/or their carer.

If you want to help, **approach** the individual calmly and from the side of the carer, if possible. Tactfully **ask if they need assistance.**

Don't take any action without the carer's approval.

If you don't know what to do or how to react, **ask a member of the airport staff** for information on what to do.

Be **patient** and **supportive** in any way you can.

The parents of people with ASD are doing everything they can to help. **They are not to blame for any difficulties.** Try to be supportive and discreet.

Remember that there's a difference between "I don't want to do something" and "**I can't do something**".

The Methodology of Social Stories

What are Social Stories?


Social Stories (SS) are short stories that present specific scenarios and the ways in which one or more people may be involved in them. They include information on specific situations, including step-by-step guidance on how to deal with them, the different ways they might evolve, and the reactions we might expect from the parties involved. **The term 'Social Stories' is attributed to Carol Gray (2015).**

The Aim of Social Stories

Using photographs or a clear description of a social situation, we develop a social story with a view to teaching effective and socially acceptable ways of behaving which a child with ASD can adopt to replace inadequate or ineffective behaviours. Hence, on the one hand, the social behaviour of those who read Social Stories improves, whilst, on the other hand, potentially ineffective reactions, such as increased anxiety or the tendency to avoid situations, which an individual with ASD may find challenging, are minimized.

Writing Social Stories

When writing Social Stories, a particular structure is employed with a specific way of writing and/or illustrating; this is designed to help the reader understand a complex or difficult situation by presenting relevant information in a clear and literal manner, usually with the support of visual material.



**Social Stories
are a tool –
they are not rules.**

Carol Gray lays out a number of guidelines which help us write social stories. When writing a social story that aims to familiarize someone with air travel procedures, it is important to take the following principles into account:

1. Start early

It's important to have enough time to find and process the information that will be needed for your flight and to prepare the child in a way that does not induce stress.

2. Gather information

Before you start your preparations, **try to gather as much information as you can about the journey** you'll be taking.

- General information on the **social situation** (who, where, when, how, what, why).
- **Specific features** of the child that might impact on the outcome of the story (age, cognitive level, special interests, typical behaviour).

3. Shape the story

Once you have gathered your information, it is essential to adapt the social story to the child's needs. You need to bear the following in mind when you are writing the story:

- A story is constructed on the basis of **four fundamental types of sentences**: those that Describe, those that deal with Internal States, those that Affirm, and those that Guide (Gray, 2012).
- In any Social Story, a Guiding Sentence needs to be complemented by 2-5 Descriptive Sentences and/or Internal States Sentences or Affirmation Sentences.

4. Read them together

It is best to read the Social Stories in a **quiet** place when the child is **relaxed and cheerful**. **Note the child's reactions** so you can amend or explain something further, if necessary.

5. Repeat

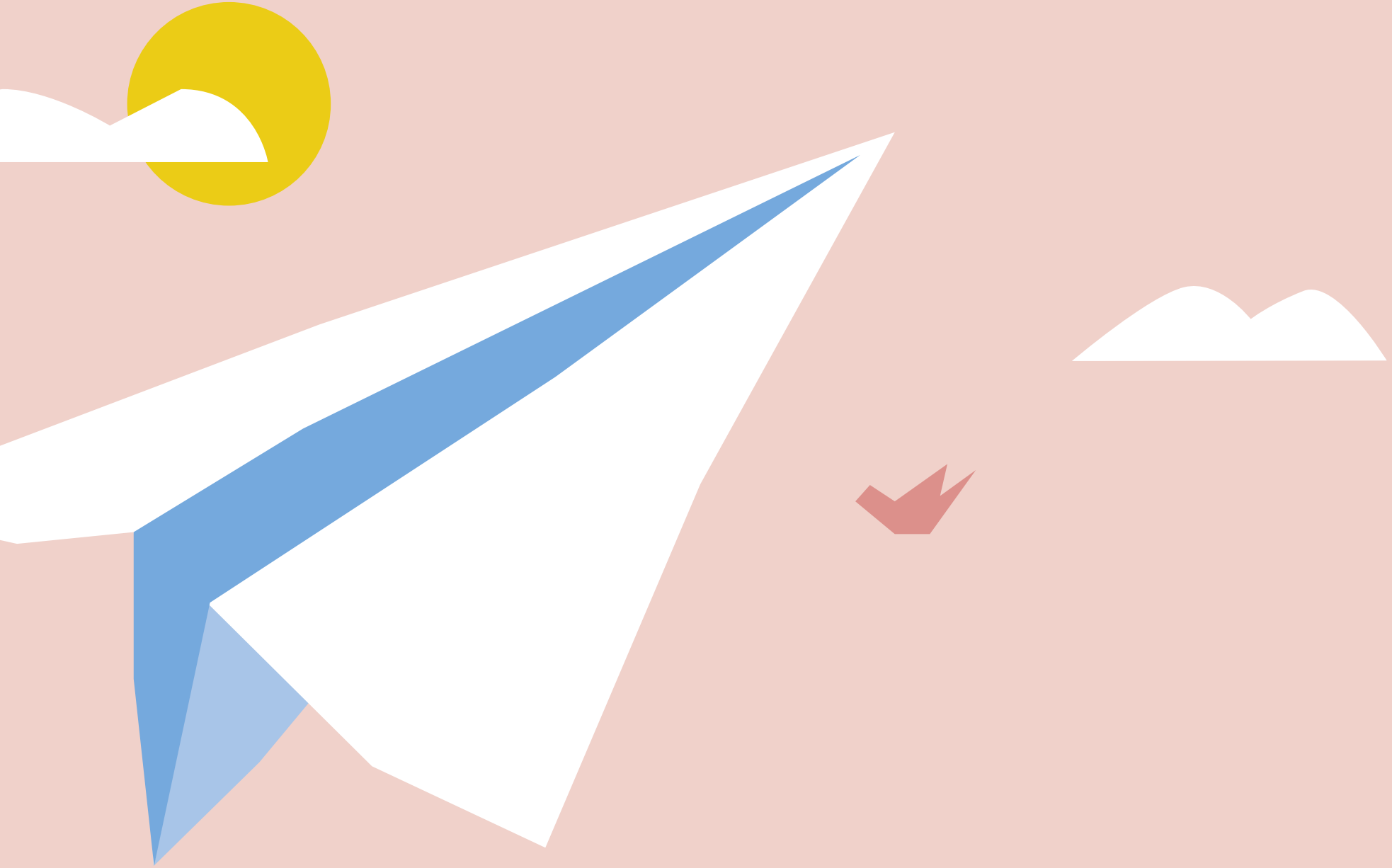
Social Stories should be read in full **2-3 days before** the planned journey in order to leave time for repetition. The SS should be available to the child, so that he/she can **process it alone**, too.

6. Inform others

It's important that everyone involved in the Story should **be clear about their role** and respond accordingly.

7. Remember

To keep the SS with you until the end of your journey.

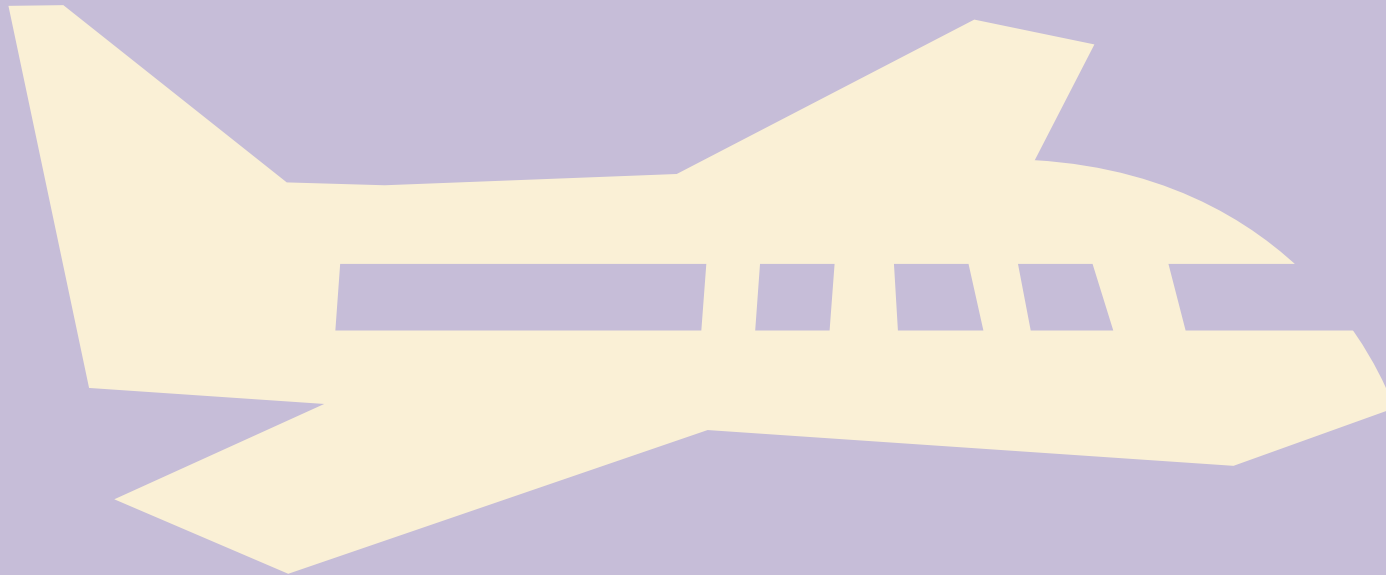


Introductory paragraphs before the Social Stories themselves— Guidelines for parents/carers

In the case of individuals with ASD, the appropriate preparation for a flight will determine the success or otherwise of their journey.

The nine social stories below constitute a comprehensive program which aims to prepare children with ASD to take a flight. They begin by addressing how the child can prepare himself/herself for the journey and end with boarding the aircraft and preparing for take-off.

Story for a young child with ASD
who needs considerable support

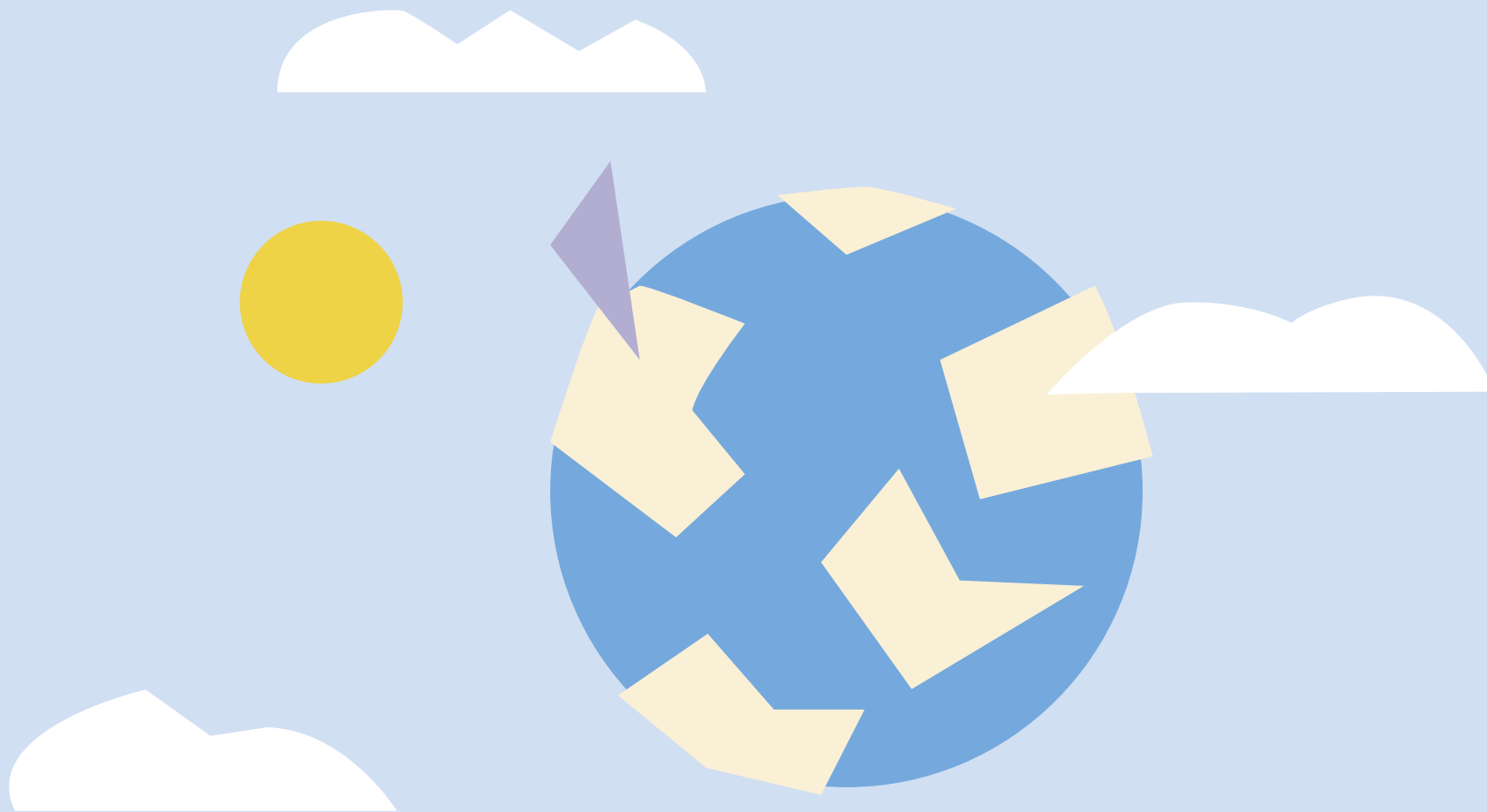


1st Social Story -
“Preparing for a flight”

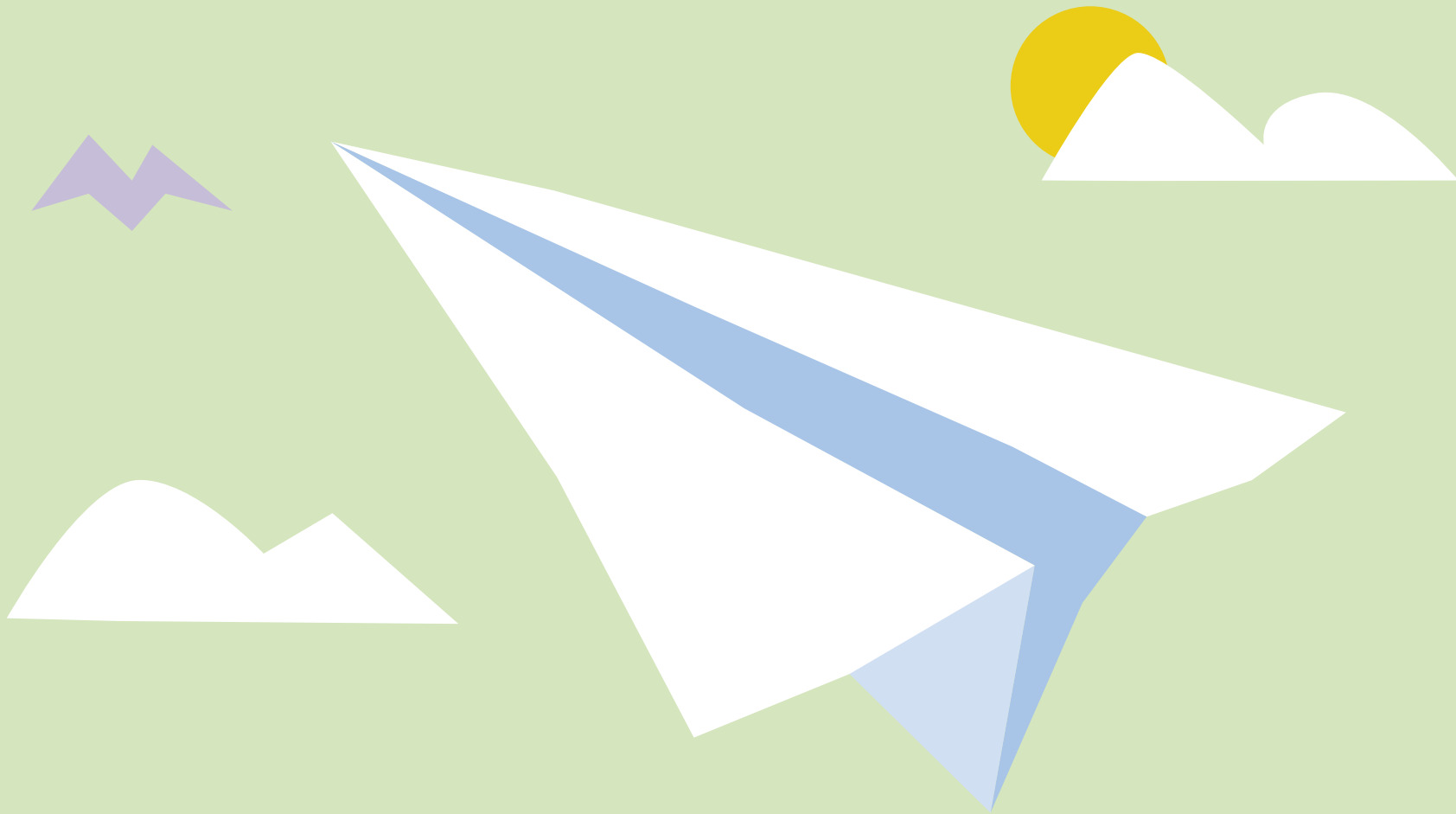
Information about the journey (Introductory Story)



My name is and I am years old.



Together with (name of carer), we decided to go
on a trip to (destination).



We are going to fly to (destination).

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We're going to travel on a plane
(circle the date on the calendar)



My parents are really happy
that we'll be flying on a plane together.



And I'm really happy, too,
that we'll be flying!

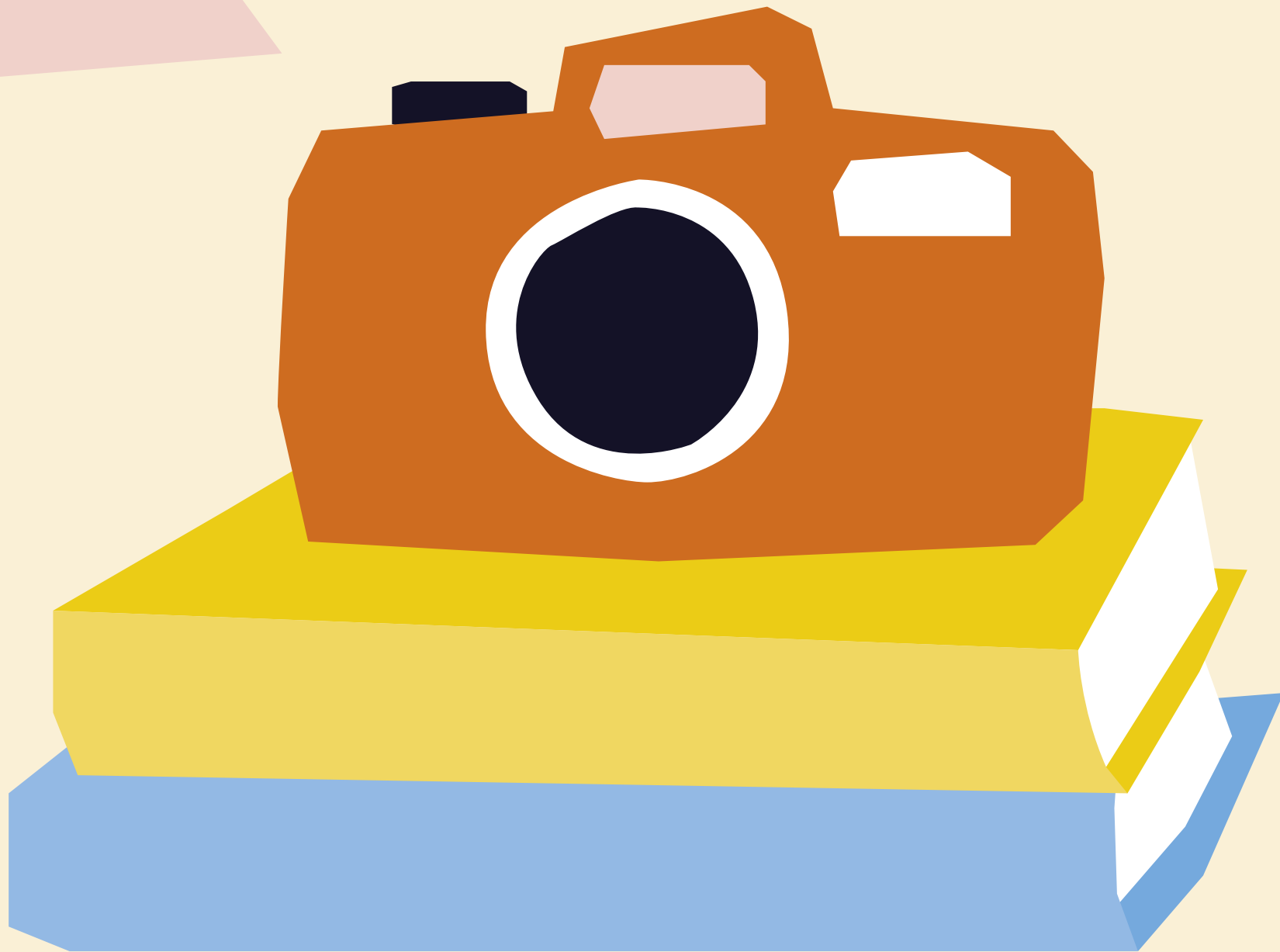
Don't forget!

Things to remember when preparing for a journey by air:

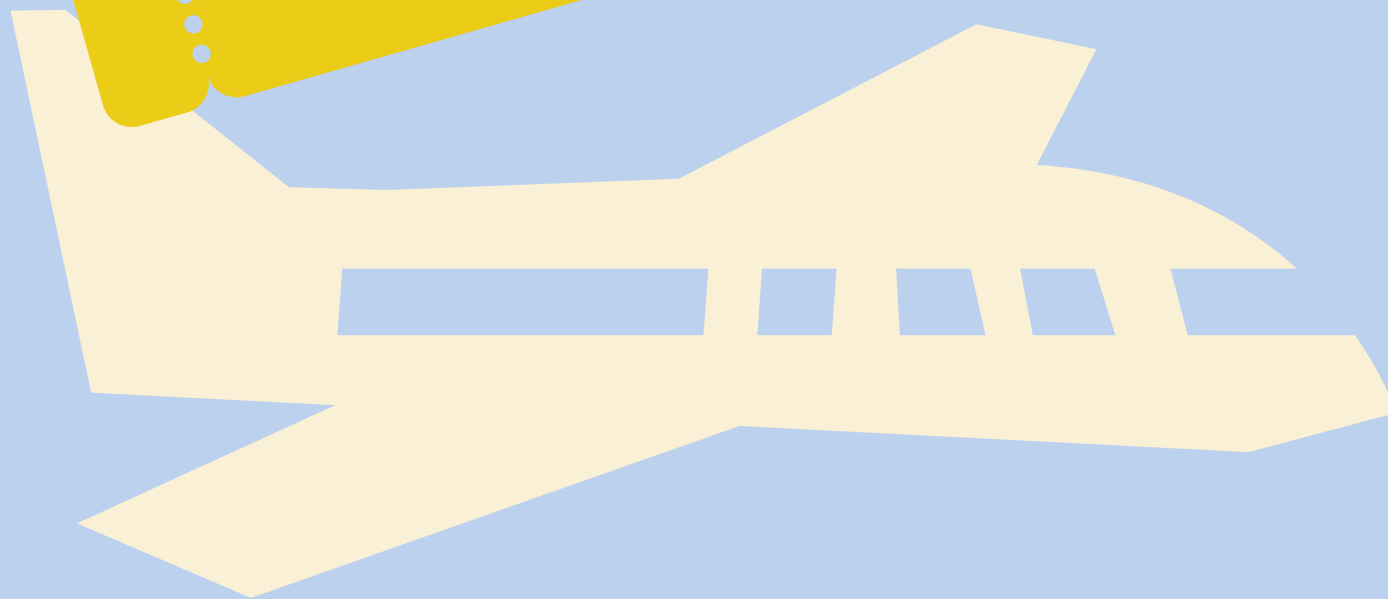
The following can be used to familiarize a child with a flight:

- books
- videos and/or photographs
- toys and games (Playmobil, jigsaws)





Story for a young child with ASD
who needs considerable support

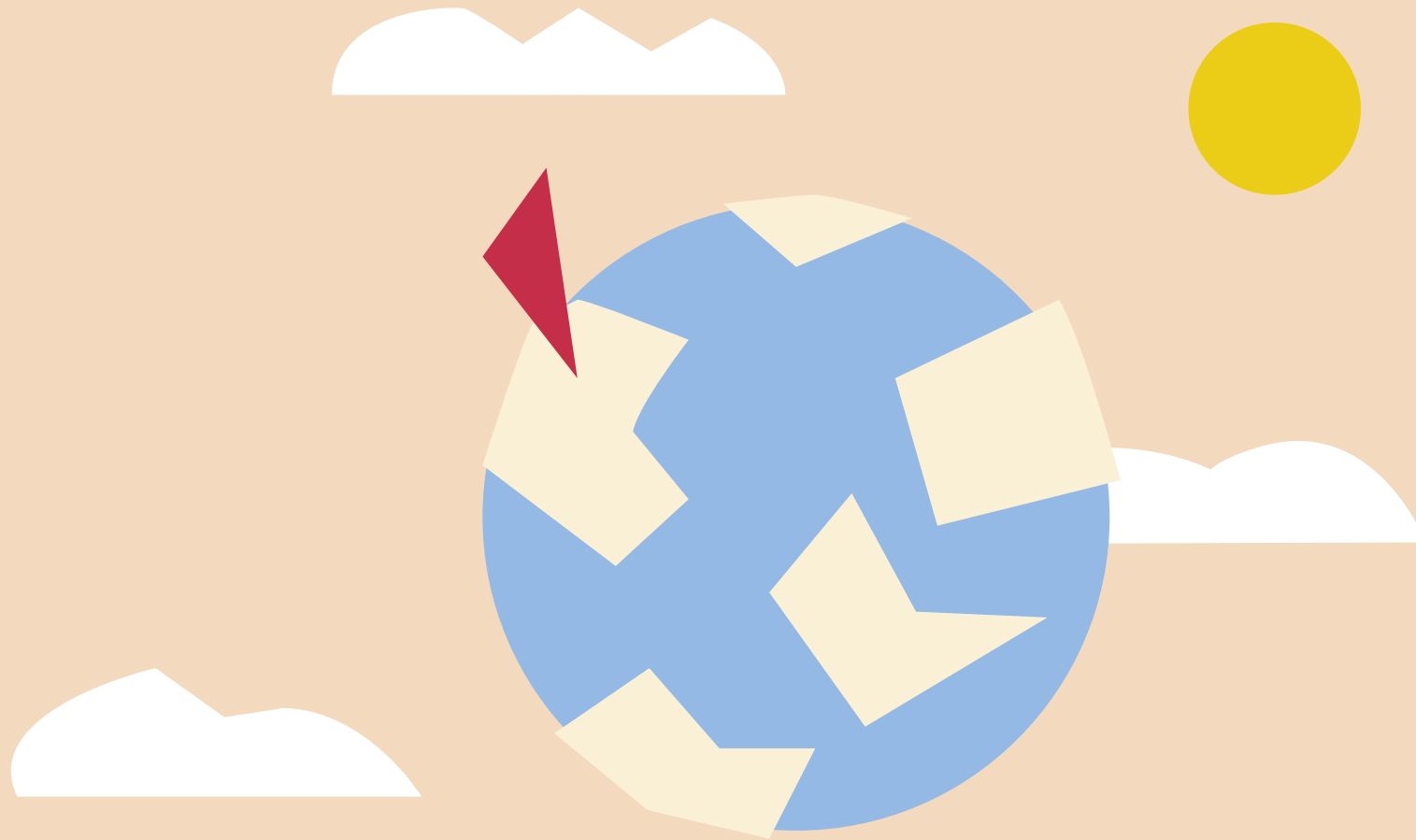


2nd Social Story – “Preparing for the flight”

I get my clothes and my bag ready for the journey.



My name is and I am years old.



I'm going to fly to (destination)
with (carer).

JANUARY

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OCTOBER

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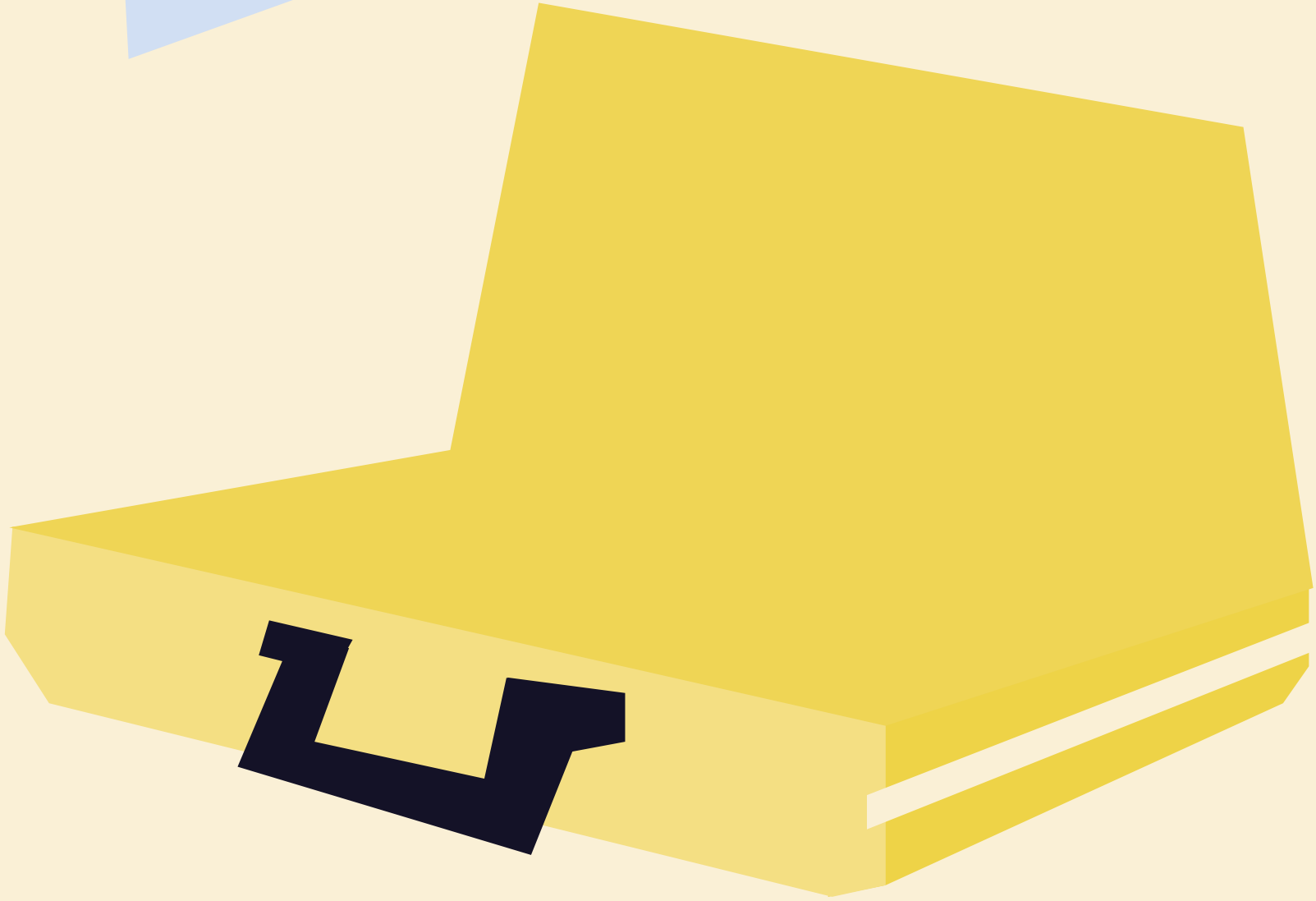
NOVEMBER

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One day before the journey
(I circle the date on the calendar)



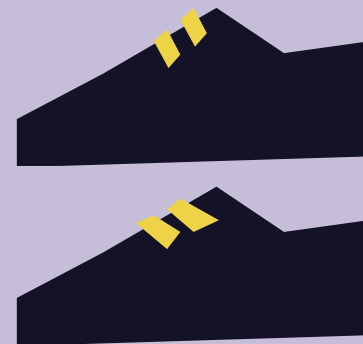
1. We are going to pack our bags.
Mum will help me pack my suitcase.

2. I'm going to take a backpack with me on board the plane with my favourite things in it.

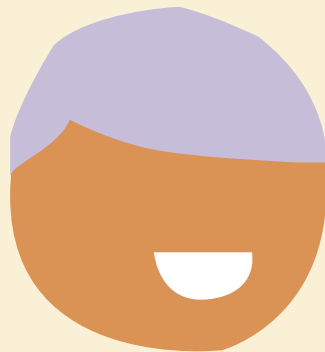
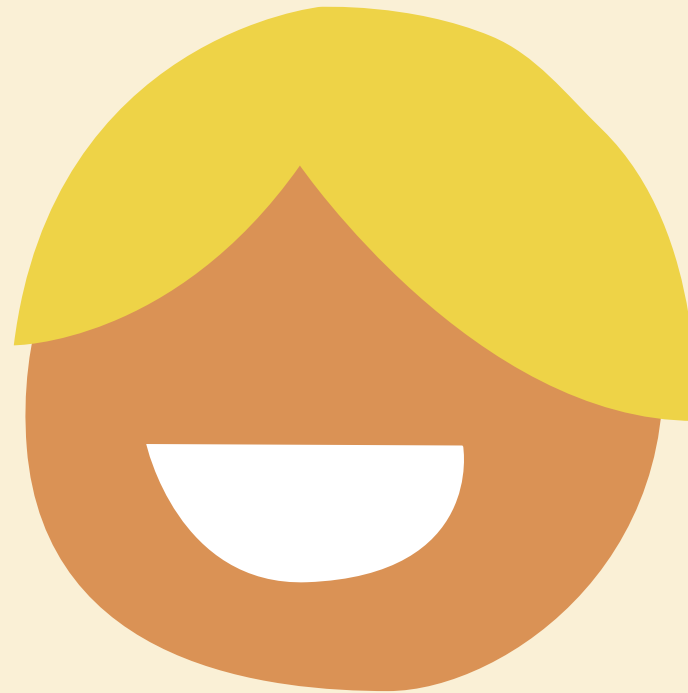


I'm going to put these things in it:

-
-
-



3. These are the clothes I'm going to wear on the journey.
I remember to put my clothes next to my bag so they're ready!



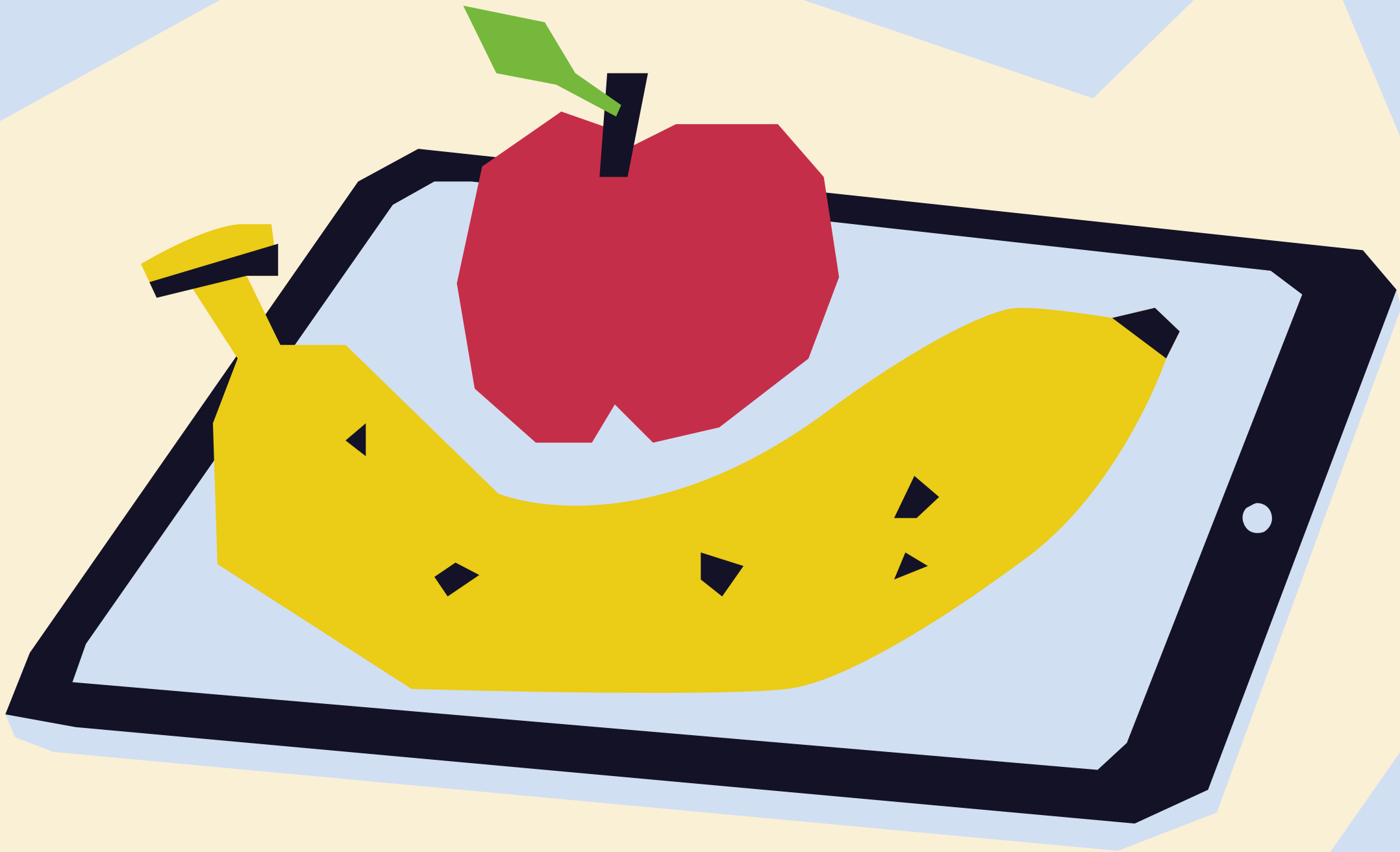
I'm happy I'm going on a journey tomorrow.

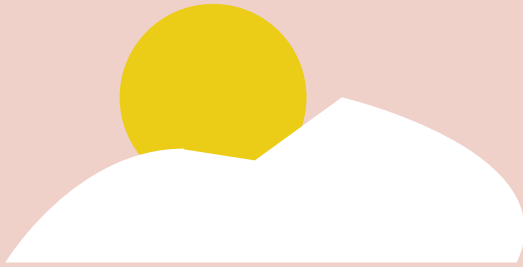
Don't forget!

When preparing the child's hand luggage:

Include things that will keep them occupied throughout the journey, like:

- a new game or toy
- a tablet with their favourite apps on it
- snacks and drinks





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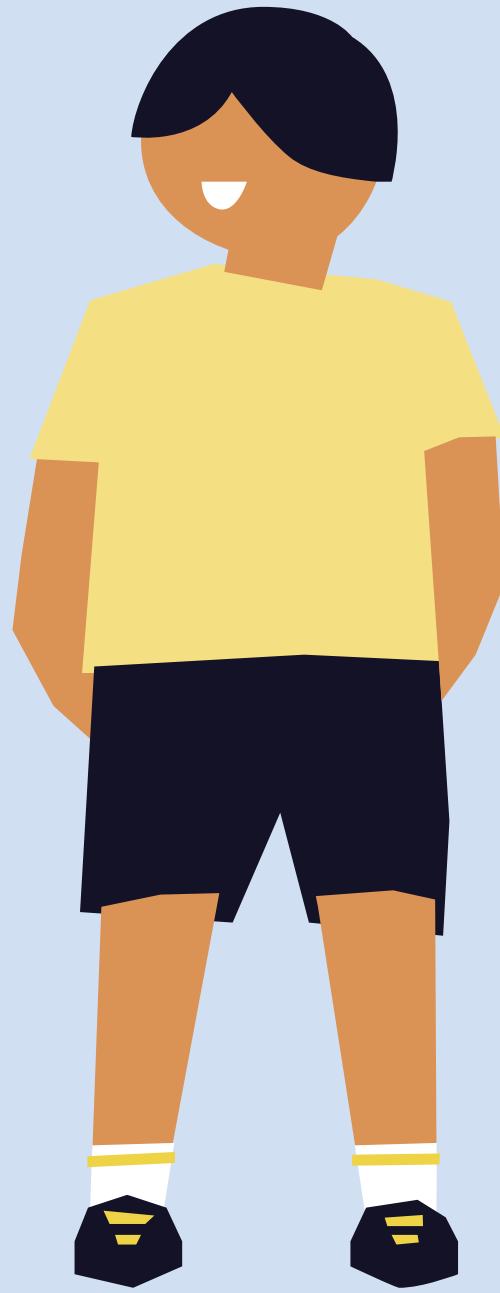
3rd Social Story – “Preparing for the flight”

I get myself ready to go to the airport.



Today...

- I'm going to get dressed and get my backpack.
- I'm going to the airport by (mode of transport)
with (carer).
- I'm going to travel by plane.
- We're going to (destination).



I put on the clothes I've chosen.



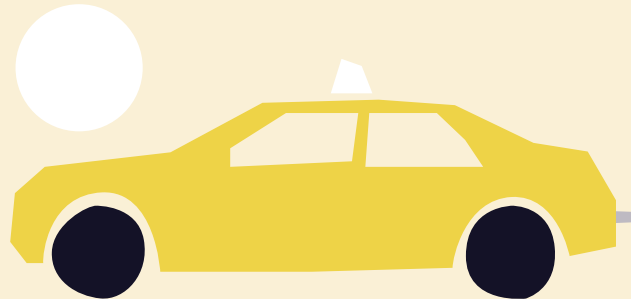
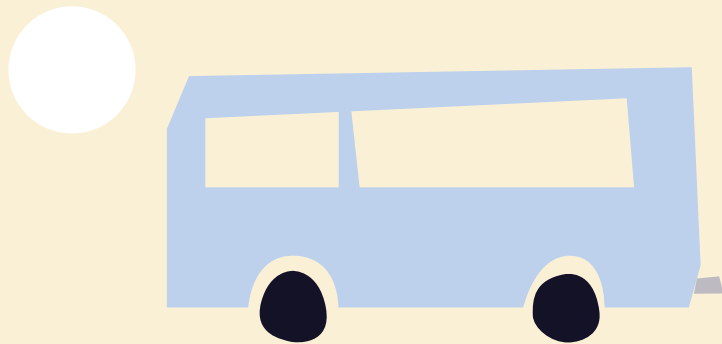
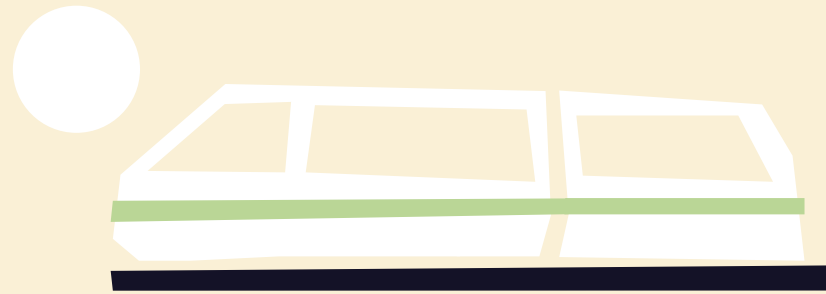
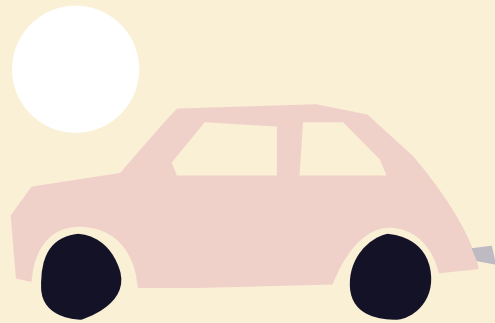
I put on my backpack.

We get our luggage.





We leave the house.



We're going to the airport by
(means of transport).



We're happy because we've got ourselves
ready for the airport.

Don't forget!

Before you leave for the airport, make sure:

That you've contacted the airline you'll be flying with well in advance in order to:

- Enquire about their policy on travellers with ASD. Every airline has its own.
- Inform the airline of the child's needs during the booking process. In addition, ensure that you've informed the airline if the child has particular difficulties dealing with, for example, noises or bright lights.

In this case, the airline will inform the airport that they need to provide a suitably trained employee to escort you along an alternative route to the aircraft.

- Arrange details relating to the flight (the child's meals, for example).





Story for a 9-year-old with ASD
who needs support



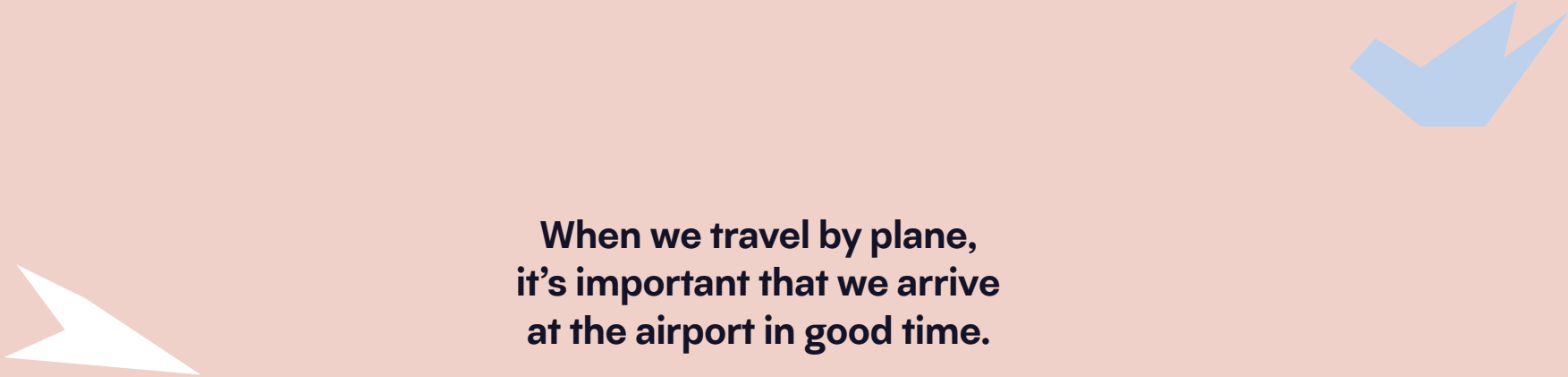
4th Social Story –
“Travelling from the house to the airport”

It's the day of the flight!

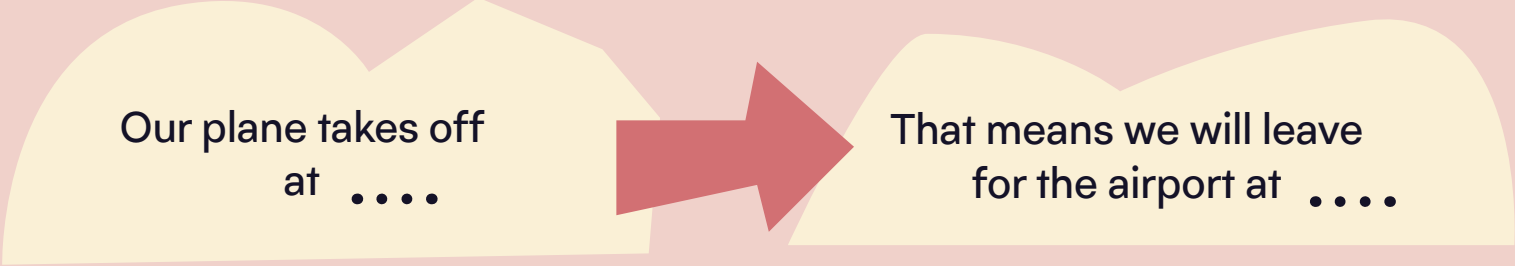
Today, we are going to
by plane.

I feel:



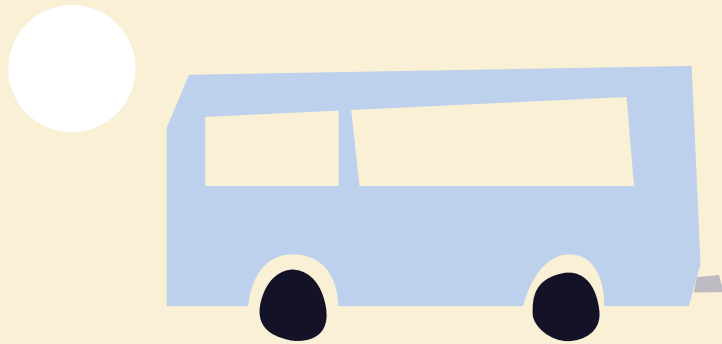
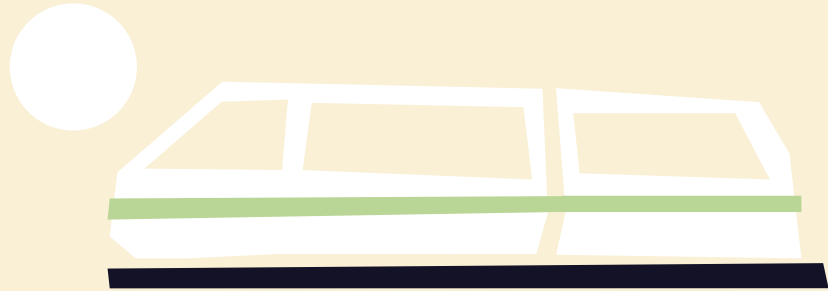


**When we travel by plane,
it's important that we arrive
at the airport in good time.**




Our plane takes off
at

That means we will leave
for the airport at



We'll be travelling to the airport by
(mode of transport).



It's important to remember:

1. To keep an eye on my things

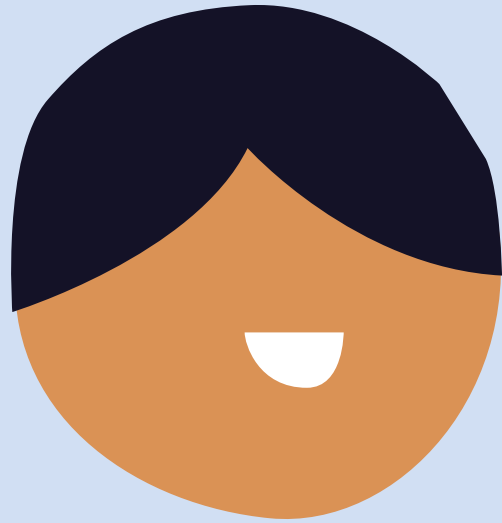
2. To listen to

.....

3. To tell

.....

if I need any help



If I manage to remember that,
we will all be safe and enjoy our journey.

Don't forget!

When travelling from the house to the airport:

It's important to remember, when choosing how to get to the airport, that it is best to minimize the child's exposure to stress-inducing stimuli before the start of your journey by air.

It is recommended that you use your own car, if possible, which is familiar to the child and which will minimize the number of intermediate stages. You can also use public transport, if this is something the child is already familiar with.



Story for a Young Child with ASD
who needs support



5th Social Story –
“Arriving at the airport, checking in
and checking in our luggage”

When we arrive at the airport,
we go in through the entrance marked:
Departures



If we have a lot of heavy luggage,
we load our bags onto a trolley.





I need to remember: At the airport, it's important to stay close to my mum and to listen carefully to her instructions.

Mum and I will go to
check in together.



Usually, people wait
in line to check in.



I will try to wait patiently
in line to check in, too.

When I'm waiting in
the check-in line, I can...



1.
2.
3.



It will soon be my turn to check in.



My mum will give them our suitcase
so they can load them on the plane.

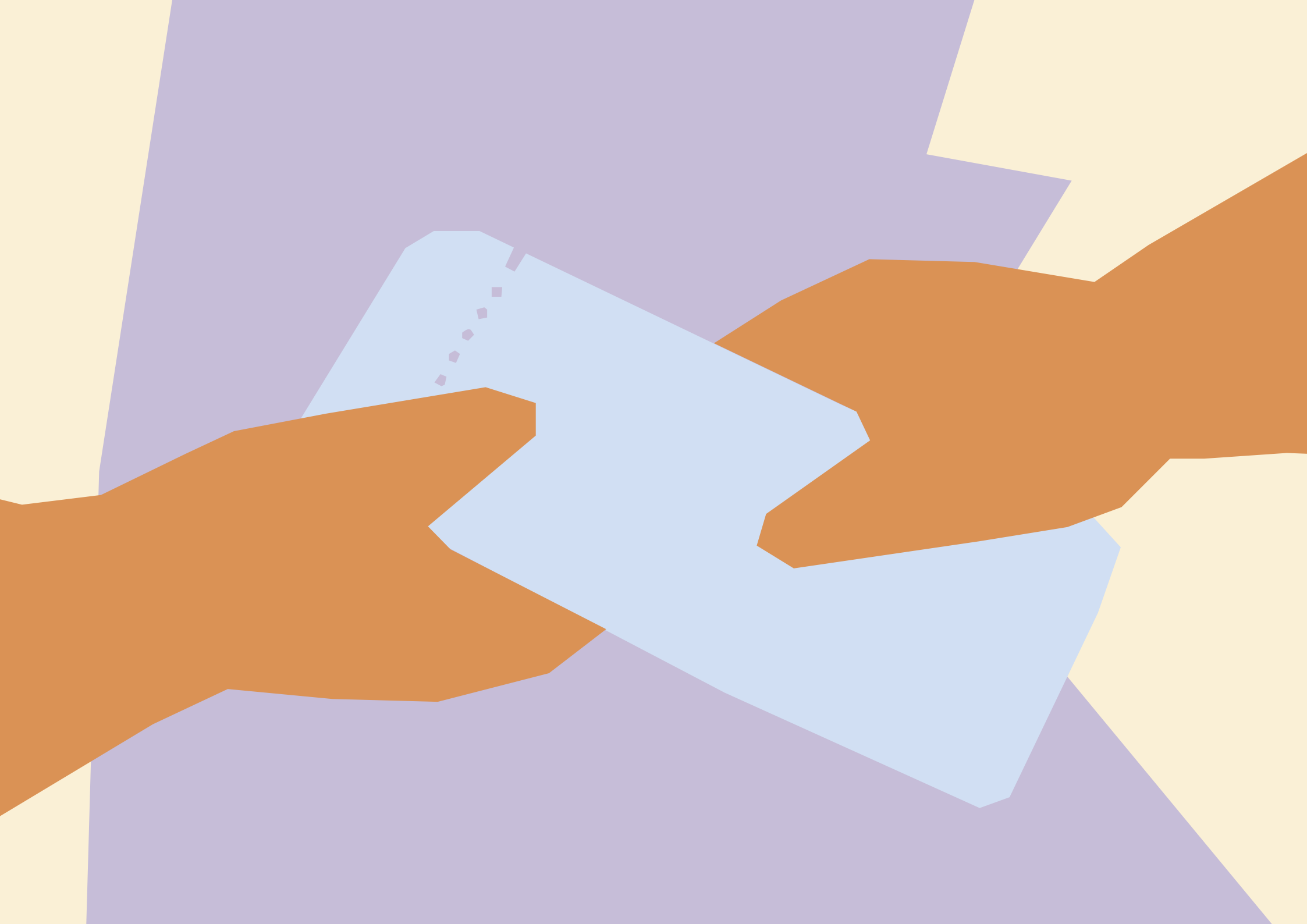


We are happy that we have checked in.

Don't forget!

When checking in, remember:

- You can request priority check-in to avoid waiting in line.
- People who receive special treatment, like children with ASD, cannot check in online.
- You should clearly inform the employee at the check-in desk about the child's special needs and preferences. Only then can they ensure the child receives the seat best suited to their requirements.
- Inform the employee at the check-in desk if the child finds it difficult to deal with bright lights or noise. They will then be able to provide a suitably trained member of staff to identify an alternative route and escort you along it.



Story for a 9-year-old child
with ASD who needs support



6th Social Story –
“Security & Baggage Check”

Once we have our boarding passes, we can start walking to passport control.



When we get there, we might have to wait a little until it's our turn. When it's our turn, mum will put our documents into the special machine so they can be checked.



Then we can continue towards the security check and wait there until it's our turn. We might need to wait for quite a long time.



When it's our turn, I take a plastic tray and put everything in it (bag, games, tablet, mobile etc.). If I'm wearing a coat and/or a belt, I take them off and put them in the tray, too.



The tray with my things will go into a machine by itself.



Then I have to walk through a metal gate by myself.



If the metal gate makes a noise, an airport employee will search me with his hands or with a device he'll pass in front of my body.



The employee might ask me to open my bag and show them what I have inside. When they have finished, I can take my things and move on. I need to remember to have my things with me and to always stay close to mum.



When the check is over,
I can go and take my things
out of the tray.



Mum and I will be really happy
that we've got this far. We'll be boarding
the plane soon.



Don't forget!

During the Security Check:

- Inform the security staff that you have priority in the queue (e.g. you should be checked first).
- Remind the child in good time that they will have to be separated from their personal belongings for a short while by showing them the corresponding steps in the social story.
- Remember to make sure the child has discarded any drinks before you reach the security check.
- It is a good idea to simulate the physical check at home before the journey.



Story for an 8-year-old child
with ASD who requires support



7th Social Story —
“Proceeding to the departure gate and waiting to board”

After the security check,
we will go to the gate
(the place where the plane is waiting).

We might have to walk for ages
before we get to the gate.
We'll see a lot of shops on the way.



To get to the gate, I might have to...

Go up or down escalators.



Get into a lift.



I need to remember
to hold onto my bag carefully.
My bag is my responsibility.



When we get to the gate,
we'll sit down and wait to be called.



While I wait at the gate,
I can...

Mum and I are very happy.
In a little while,
we'll be boarding the plane.

1.
2.
3.



Remember!

Before boarding the plane:

- In collaboration with the airline, find a quiet place inside the airport.
- Inform the airline that you have boarding priority (i.e. you should board first).



Story for a 9-year-old child
with ASD who requires support

8th Social Story –
“Passport Control and Boarding the Plane”

When it's time to board the plane, an employee will inform the passengers to go to the gate.

I stop doing what I'm doing (tablet, music), pick up my things and wait in line.



When it's our turn, mum will show the airport staff our boarding passes and ID cards/passports.



Then we'll be ready to go through the gate and walk to the plane. We'll walk down the jet bridge.



Jet bridge

I walk down the jet bridge to the plane, along with the other passengers.



The flight attendants will be waiting for us at the entrance. They will welcome us. We will greet them and board the plane.





I am very happy that I am going to board the plane.

Don't forget!

During passport control and boarding:

- Prepare the child for the fact that they might have to briefly interrupt what they're doing so they can board the plane quickly.
- Inform the airline employee at the boarding gate that you have priority.
- It would be a good idea to show the child photographs of the plane and the jet bridge as part of your preparations for the journey.

Story for a Young Child with ASD
who needs considerable support



9th Social Story —
“Entering the plane and preparing for the flight”



When we get into the plane, mum will find our seats.

When I sit down in my seat,
I will take my backpack off and put it
at my feet or in the overhead locker.



Once we sit down, it is important
we all fasten our seatbelts,
because that way we will be safe.



Mum will help me
fasten my seatbelt.



Mum will give me my backpack,
so I can choose what I want
to do during the flight. I can...

1.
2.
3.

Usually, a small screen comes down in front of us which looks like a TV.

I can watch the video playing on the TV.

I can keep on...



1.
2.
3.

A flight attendant will stand in front of us and show us what we may need to do during the flight.

It is important that mum watches the flight attendant.
I will try and be quiet.



If we need any help, the flight attendants will assist us.



My mum and I are very happy
that we're ready to begin our flight.



Don't forget!

Things to remember when boarding the aircraft:

Introduce yourselves to the crew
(they will have been briefed
and will be looking out for you).

Guidelines from Athens International Airport

Make sure you have informed your Carrier/Agent/
Tour Operator about the need for assistance,
and the form it should take, at least 48 hours
before your flight's scheduled departure time.

Describe the passenger's needs clearly and precisely.

We always recommend seeking assistance when
the passenger needs an alternative route through
the airport (because the child is, for instance,
sensitive to bright lights or noise).

On the day of your journey, present yourselves in
good time at Athens International Airport, either at
one of the Designated Points for passengers with
disabilities and/or reduced mobility or at the check-
in counters. Declare your arrival by pressing the
special button at the Point or by informing the em-
ployee at the check-in desk.

The Onassis Foundation and Special Education

The **Onassis Foundation** has now been involved in providing educational activities in the sphere of **Special Education** for five years; five years of trust placed in it by the parents of children who have participated in its workshops and who continue to support it with their presence.

The Onassis Foundation's ultimate goal is to release the potential of **children with disabilities** in the Athens area and other cities throughout Greece.

And while the means may change, the goal remains the same: providing access for as many children as possible to our workshops, reinforcing inclusion, and developing children's abilities through cooperative practices. Both parents and children should have the right to "escape".

Which is why we continue to develop **meaningful activities employing the magic of music and/or artistic expression** to help parents discover new and creative ways of communicating with their children.

The Onassis Foundation also continues to join forces with more and more **organizations and schools** involved in Special Education around Greece which are interested in collaborating on shared initiatives.

"Music Loves Autism", "Come paint music with me" and "The art of recycling" are just some of the Onassis Foundation's educational programs. At the same time, we stage hands-on Special Education workshops for educators and others active in the field of Special Education.

However, the Onassis Foundation's activities in the area of Special Education are not limited to educational programs. For decades now, the **Onassis Foundation has been supporting special schools and integration programs** with donations of books, equipment and teaching aids to help educators in their efforts. Moreover, the **Scholarships program** which the Foundation has been running since 1978 includes post-graduate studies and doctoral research in the area of Special Education at universities in Greece and abroad, while it has also consistently **supported organizations like ELEPAP** (Rehabilitation for the Disabled) in their valuable but difficult work.

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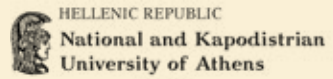
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