

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

The ER with an Autistic Adult: Preparing for the Visit You Can't Avoid

Every caregiver of a Level 2 or 3 adult eventually faces this. Almost every one of them describes it as one of the most traumatic experiences of their caregiving life. It doesn't have to go that way every time.

BY JIM PALASTY · 11 MIN READ · FIVE SCENARIOS WORTH PREPARING FOR BEFORE YOU'RE STANDING IN ONE

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SPECIFIC ER SCENARIOS THIS GUIDE PREPARES YOU FOR

A meltdown in the waiting room, pressure to sedate for behavioral management, being kept out of a procedure room, blood draw resistance, and an inappropriately initiated psychiatric hold.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

The ER is a uniquely hard environment

Bright lights, unpredictable noise, long waits, and unfamiliar touch combine into one of the most difficult sensory settings possible.



STEP 2

Preparation changes the outcome

A go-bag, a communication plan, and rehearsed advocacy language turn a chaotic visit into a manageable one.



STEP 3

Specific scenarios need specific scripts

Sedation pressure, presence during procedures, and inappropriate psychiatric holds each have a real, learnable response.

What belongs in an ER go-bag

One-page medical passport	Diagnoses, medications, communication needs, sensory triggers
Comfort items	Noise-reducing headphones, a weighted item, a familiar object
A charged AAC device or communication card	Backup power or a paper version, just in case
Advocacy language, written down	Scripts for sedation, presence, and hold-related situations
A notebook for documentation	To record what happens during and after the visit

THE PASSPORT THAT CHANGED THE WHOLE VISIT

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Douglas handed a one-page medical passport to the triage nurse before a word was exchanged about his son's actual injury, and the tone of the entire visit shifted immediately. Staff dimmed the overhead lights in the exam room without being asked twice, and a nurse checked in briefly before touching him for each new step. The visit still wasn't easy. It wasn't the trauma Douglas had braced for either.

ONE PAGE, HANDED OVER BEFORE A SINGLE QUESTION WAS ASKED, CHANGED HOW THE ENTIRE VISIT WENT.

What matters, at a glance

Why ERs are uniquely hard

Bright fluorescent lighting, unpredictable sounds, long unstructured waits, and unfamiliar physical contact all compound at once.

The ER go-bag

A one-page medical passport, comfort items, noise-reducing headphones, and a charged communication device, packed and ready.

Sedation pressure is common

Staff unfamiliar with autism sometimes push toward sedation for behavioral management before trying accommodation first.

Caregiver presence during procedures

For many nonverbal adults, a familiar caregiver present is medically relevant, not just comforting, and worth advocating for directly.

Inappropriate psychiatric holds happen

A behavioral meltdown is sometimes misread as a psychiatric emergency. Know the difference and be ready to advocate.

Document the visit afterward

A written record of what happened supports both immediate follow-up care and any future advocacy that becomes necessary.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

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| ☐ A completed one-page medical passport, printed and ready | ☐ Comfort items: headphones, a weighted item, a familiar object |
| ☐ A backup communication method (charged device or paper card) | ☐ Written advocacy language for sedation, presence, and hold scenarios |
| ☐ A notebook for documenting the visit as it happens | |

YOUR MOVE

When an ER visit is unavoidable, here is how to prepare and advocate

- 1 Pack an ER go-bag now and keep it accessible at all times.
- 2 Hand staff a one-page medical passport immediately at triage.
- 3 State clearly if sedation is being proposed before other accommodations are tried.
- 4 Request explicitly to remain present during procedures if medically relevant.
- 5 Advocate directly if a psychiatric hold seems to be starting inappropriately.
- 6 Document the visit afterward for follow-up care and future reference.

The ER doesn't have to be the worst part of the emergency. Preparation is what actually determines that, more than the emergency itself.

EMERGENCY CARE PREPARATION RESOURCES

Communication FIRST (communicationfirst.org) offers guidance on ensuring AAC and communication needs are respected during medical emergencies.

Autism Society National Helpline (autism-society.org) can help connect families to local advocates familiar with emergency room accommodation issues.

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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