Going to the zoo or aquarium can be a great day out and a fun time for the whole family. For individuals with autism there are some things you can do to prepare for this exciting trip and make the day a success!
Before going to the zoo or aquarium it would be helpful to take a look at their website. Most zoos and aquariums have maps and details about the park. You can print out pictures of the exhibits at the zoo as well as the map to see where they are located.

Showing the pictures of these animals, and videos can help your child to enjoy the experience and also know what to expect. For instance if certain animals make loud noises, knowing this ahead of time may help to make your child more comfortable.
You can use the map to outline the easiest route while at the zoo. Zoos can be very large and spread out, whereas an aquarium might be more condensed. On the map you can identify places to eat, restrooms and exits. You may also want to mark where the first aid station is in case of an emergency. You may also want to call ahead to clear up any questions you have regarding their facilities. Make sure to ask where there are quiet places to sit and unwind, which exhibits are enclosed/very busy and the best times to visit when there are the least amount of crowds.
Since zoos and aquariums are extremely busy, safety is very important. Having your child wear some type of identification can put parent’s fears at ease. Also creating a safety plan and going over tips with your child is a good preventative measure.

Here are some safety tips from the Autism Safety Project:
WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET LOST

Before individuals with autism begin to participate in activities in the community, it is important to talk to them about what to do if they get lost. Teaching him or her the steps below and taking extra precautions can help your loved one if they get lost:
• Stay calm, stay put and make noise.
• Do not panic.
• Stop where you are and try to remember your route.
• If available, use your cell phone to call 911 or home.
• Have identification available.
• Ensure you have the Autism Introduction Card (e.g., My name is David and I have Autism). Look for a police car or a law enforcement officer or zoo employee.
WHO TO ASK FOR HELP

It is very important for individuals with autism to be able to advocate for themselves while out in the community. These self-advocacy skills include understanding how to ask for help if needed and knowing who to ask for help. The tips below address who to ask for help in an emergency or non-emergency situation. Ways to ask for help depend greatly on the circumstances surrounding the need for help.
IN AN EMERGENCY SITUATION...

• Scream, yell, or shout...”HELP”
• Move to a crowd (Safety in numbers).
• Reach out to a law enforcement officer, fireman, zoo/aquarium staff or person of authority.
• Seek out someone with other children.

IN A NON EMERGENCY SITUATION...

• Reach out to a family member or friend
TALKING TO STRANGERS

- Conversations should be limited or non-existent to potential strangers.
- Keep your guard up.
- Do not answer personal questions.
- Be polite but reserved.
- If you feel uncomfortable, walk away quickly.
- If you feel threatened or in danger, run away.
- Do not stand too close to stranger. Be mindful of personal space if a conversation happens to take place.
OTHER TIPS AND IDEAS

The petting zoo can be a great experience but can also be overwhelming for some individuals. Help prepare your loved one for this experience by talking about the different sights, smells, sounds and textures they will encounter.

– It be helpful to discuss how to interact with the animals.
– Petting zoos can also be very crowded and you may be in close spaces with others. Go over ways to interact with others and how to wait your turn in line or ask for a turn if need be.
• When walking around the zoo you may notice animals that are not in enclosures such as peacocks and other birds. These birds are not harmful but it’s important not to touch them.

• It’s important to go over appropriate and safe behavior while at the zoo. This will ensure the safety of your loved one and the animals as well.
• Often times there can be shows at the zoo, before going in ask a staff member about how long the show is and how crowded it can get.

• Zoos are very large and outdoors. Remember to dress appropriately for the weather and wear comfortable shoes as you will be walking a lot.

• Call the zoo ahead of time and see if there are any themed events, such as Halloween time. This may result in the zoo being much busier and more congested than usual.
• At the aquarium most of the animals will be behind glass – it’s important to look through the glass but not tap on it – it can disturb the animals.

• There may be some exhibits where you can stand close to a tank and see over the edge – make sure to keep your hands out of the water. For your safety and the animals as well.
We hope you enjoy your day at the zoo or aquarium! If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at 1-888-AUTISM-2.