NEWS RELEASE

Mock flight program helps kids with autism soar

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Twice a year, American Airlines hosts It's Cool to Fly AA at Chicago O'Hare Airport. The event aims to brighten the smiles of young people with autism. And it's no ordinary event — it's a full mock airport experience, where participants check in, maneuver through security, board the plane and taxi around the airport.

Each year, American partners with Clearbrook, a Chicago area organization that serves more than 8,000 people with disabilities, to provide this volunteer-led program. We work together to create an environment with all of the sounds and sensations a child with autism might experience in flight, without ever leaving the ground.

As a result, families have been able to take vacations and trips. The role playing and realistic airport interactions help their kids grow accustomed to the experience of flight. "Events like this truly make a difference in the lives of individuals like my son and make both the parents and child feel both hope and happiness," says Tracy Hellner, the mother of a child with autism. The children leave the event with smiles on their faces as they become familiar by repetition — for some, it's their third or fourth time to attend.

For the volunteers, it's an event they look forward to hosting. The most recent "trip" included Captain Jeff Paschen and First Officer Roger Mayer, five flight attendants, 29 families and 32 children with autism, including 9-year-old Zachary Smart (pictured). "I did not see the picture of Zachary until later," says First Officer Roger Mayer, who's a veteran volunteer for It's Cool to Fly AA. "When I did, I got a little choked up — not in a sad way, but in a happy, fulfilled, mission accomplished kind of way. I hope to see Zachary on board one of our flights someday soon."