

It's Cool to Fly Program to be Featured on 'Meet the Peetes'

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April is National Autism Awareness Month, a time meant to improve awareness and acceptance of autism and draw attention to the tens of thousands of people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) each year. Airport Harmonization Specialist Bruce Sickler's daily job is to ensure that American enacts policies and best practices that take into consideration the obstacles faced by customers and team members with disabilities, seen or unseen. In 2014, he started It's Cool to Fly, a program that gives travelers with ASD a mock airport experience.

For children on the autism spectrum, the unfamiliar drill of air travel can be an overwhelming experience. Whether it's getting your boarding pass, waiting in line at security or not understanding why you need to go through a metal detector away from your belongings, every task is new. Tack on to that the constant waiting and the amount of people you encounter in an airport, and you can understand why most families who have a child with autism skip air travel altogether.

Bruce Sickler, who suffered an injury in 1993 that limits his mobility, understands the difficulty that those traveling with disabilities face. It is his job to take the obstacles that customers with special needs encounter and help create a solution to mitigate them. It didn't take Bruce long after he started with American in 2000 to begin to seize the opportunity to educate and advocate on the needs of those living with disabilities — both for American team members and customers. He became president of the airline's Abilities Employee Business Resource Group, which works to create an inclusive environment for team members with different needs.

The It's Cool to Fly program, now in its fourth year, offers families traveling with children who have autism the opportunity to take what is essentially a test flight, but on the ground. Participants come to an airport, check in, go through security, wait in a crowded space, board and taxi around the tarmac — all to become comfortable with the

sensory experience of air travel. A typical event lasts about 3 1/2 hours.

“You watch, from start to finish, the parents coming into the airport. When they are sitting and waiting for the plane, you see this face of concern; the what-if factor is all over the parents’ faces,” Bruce said. “They worry how their child is going to react because they’ve seen their reaction before. But then you get on the plane and see that little bit of worry release. Then you get off the plane and they are excited; they know how much their child can do and that this program has helped make a difference.”

The free program does a lot to help children with autism, but it also allows American team members to become more aware of the obstacles that these customers face and how they can assist during the process. Every American team member involved in the mock flight is a volunteer. “They do it because they care,” Bruce said. “And they get something valuable out of it, too. They are learning firsthand the compassion needed to serve these customers and their loved ones at every step of their journey.”

This year, there are plans for 25 events at airports across American’s network, and the program continues to grow. Bruce said he works with local autism advocacy organizations in each It’s Cool to Fly city to spread the word about the program and identify participants.

Last year, actress Holly Robinson Peete participated in the program with her son, RJ, who was diagnosed with autism in 2000, when he was 3 years old. After participating, Holly wanted to film an It’s Cool to Fly event to feature on Meet the Peetes, her reality show that follows the actress’ busy life with her husband, former NFL player Rodney Peete, and their four children. “After going through the mock flight for the first time back in the fall, Holly wanted to show others what American does for those with autism and help spread awareness,” Bruce said.

So in January, American partnered with Holly and Rodney’s foundation, **HollyRod**, for another It’s Cool to Fly event at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). You can see it in action for yourself on the season finale of Meet the Peetes this Sunday, April 22, at 9 p.m. CT on the Hallmark Channel. And you can read more of Bruce’s story in April’s **American Way** magazine, which is available in seatbacks on board all American Airlines flights.

Bruce Sickler, seated center, poses with actress Holly Robinson Peete and LAX volunteers at the It’s Cool to Fly event.

Holly makes an announcement with Customer Service Coordinator Ralph Galvan at the It’s Cool to Fly event at LAX.