

NEWS RELEASE

It's Cool to Fly: American Airlines program helps kids with autism soar to new heights

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To many flyers, the airport experience is a routine part of life. Check-in, security, gate areas and jet bridges are features of a second home. Customers buckle in, the plane pushes back and with a nudge of the throttles, two engines begin to roar. The plane taxis down the ramp and onto the active taxiway in preparation for takeoff.

With each of those experiences comes sensory inputs that we might take for granted — sights and sounds like crowds, intercom announcements, lights, screens, safety demonstrations and more. But to a child with autism, and to that child's family, any of these things can instantly create fear, anxiety or discomfort and become a challenge that, in the moment, feels insurmountable.

For the last five years, American Airlines team members across the country have partnered with local organizations and airport colleagues to make the process less of a mystery, helping these children and their families know what to expect from their air travel experience and bringing greater inclusion, awareness and understanding to those on the autism spectrum. And they've had one unified message: It's Cool to Fly American (ICTFA).

ICTFA is essentially a mock travel experience. Kids and their families concerned about the hustle and bustle of air travel are able to experience nearly every aspect of it without actually taking off. They park, check-in, wait at the gate, board, taxi, return to the gate and retrieve their luggage. The experience lasts about 3 1/2 hours.

Since its inception in 2014, ICTFA has served more than 5,000 participants and 1,500 families.

"For many, travel is about quality family time, seeing new places and connecting with loved ones," said Bruce Sickler, a Reservations Representative in Dallas-Fort Worth who founded ICTFA. "At American, we are aware that

families traveling with children on the autism spectrum have some concerns that make it stressful for all involved. This program has helped make a difference by turning worry into excitement."

While ICTFA is especially meaningful in April — National Autism Awareness Month — it is available year-round. And it's not possible without caring volunteers from every part of the operation, including Reservations, Customer Service, Flight, Flight Service and Fleet Service; the Transportation Security Administration (TSA); and more.

"ICTFA hits home personally for me," said Carmen Calhoun, a Reservations Representative on the Resolution Service Desk in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "I have a 19-year-old niece with autism. I never knew what autism was until she was diagnosed. Back then, there were not many resources for families with kids with autism. That's why ICTFA is so important. Giving families an opportunity to have that travel experience with guidance and help along the way is a huge deal and volunteering for this event gives me a great sense of joy and accomplishment."

The initiative is also valuable for the team members who are involved, particularly those who work onboard aircraft. Through this experience, they grow to understand the difficulty that those traveling with autism face and how they can care for and assist families during their journey. They are also encouraged to ask customers how best they can assist and allow each family to determine their own specific needs.

Since ICTFA started, the program has grown from mainline stations to regional stations and has welcomed involvement from wholly owned American Eagle carriers and other regional partners. All told, 49 cities have participated and there are plans to grow to international stations in the near future. The growth of this program has also presented the opportunity for collaboration between the Abilities Employee Business Resource Groups at American and AT&T, which help register families for ICTFA.

The next event is scheduled for Jacksonville, Florida (JAX), on April 27. Additional locations for 2019 include MIA, ORD, DFW and DCA.



