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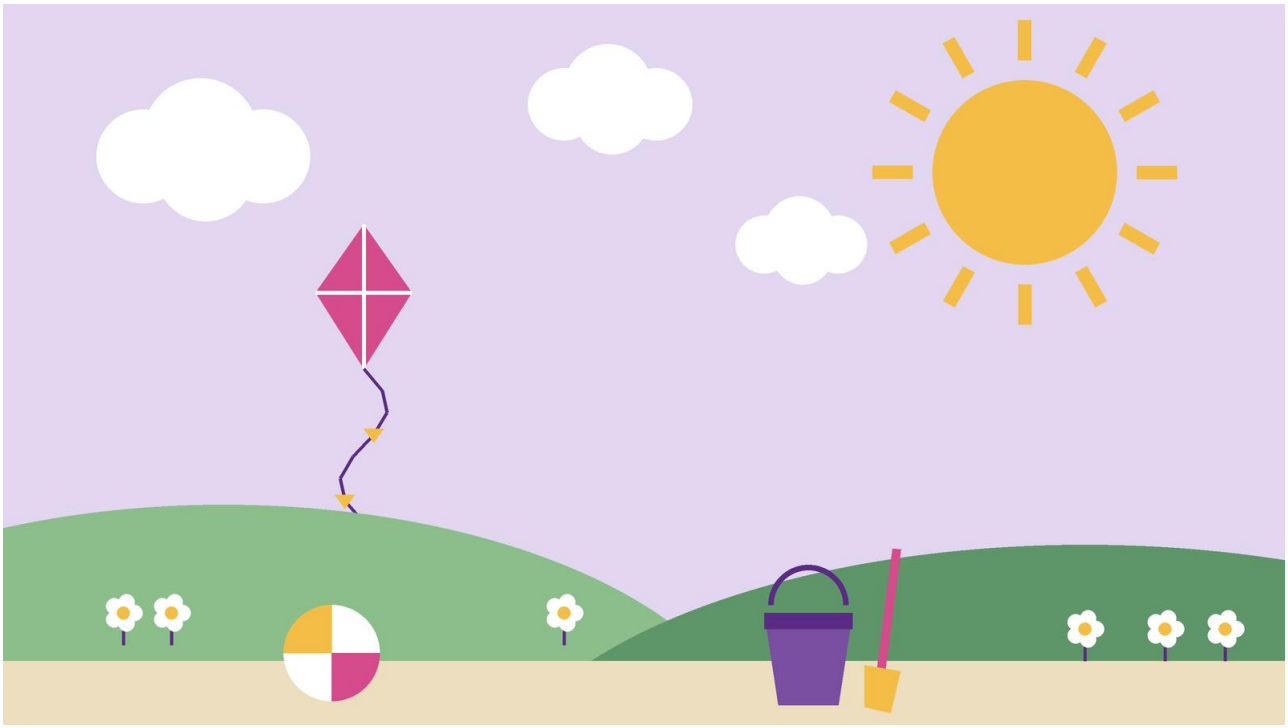
Autism

Summer Survival Guide

Making the long summer holidays calmer, safer and more fun — practical ideas for families of autistic children



Inside this guide

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Barking & Dagenham · Havering · Redbridge

Welcome

Six weeks without school can feel like a long time — for children and for parents. For many autistic children, losing the structure of the school day, coping with heat and bright light, busy parks and changes of plan can cause anxiety, meltdowns or shutdowns. Many also start worrying about September long before it arrives.

This guide is full of ideas to help you build a summer that works for **your** child. Use what helps and leave the rest. A summer with plenty of quiet days at home is still a good summer.

Why summer can feel hard

What changes	Why it matters
Loss of routine	No school bell, no timetable and later bedtimes. Long, unstructured days can feel unsettling.
Heat and light	Hot days, bright sunshine and light evenings can be uncomfortable and make it hard to sleep.
New textures	Sun cream, shorts, sandals, swimwear and sunhats can all feel strange or unbearable.
Noise and crowds	Busy parks, ice-cream vans, lawnmowers, barbecues, buzzing insects and fireworks.
Changes of plan	Weather-dependent plans, holidays, trips and visitors bring uncertainty.
Worries about September	A new teacher, class or school can cause anxiety throughout the holidays.

Remember

- Meltdowns and shutdowns are a response to being overwhelmed — not bad behaviour.
- Your child may need lots of downtime to recover from the school year.
- It is fine to keep things small, local and familiar.
- Look after yourself too — ask for help and take breaks when you can.

Planning the holidays

A little structure goes a long way. Most children cope better when they can see what is coming, even if the plan is simple.

Make the summer visible

- **Summer calendar:** show the whole holiday on one page, with the first and last days, trips, appointments and the first day back at school.
- **Visual timetable:** use photos or symbols for each day — e.g. breakfast, park, lunch, quiet time, tea, bath, bed.
- **Plan A and Plan B:** for outdoor plans, show what you will do if it rains or is too hot, so a change doesn't come as a shock.
- **Social stories:** prepare for new things like a trip, a holiday club or visiting relatives.

Keep some anchors

- Keep wake-up, meals and bedtime close to term-time where possible.
- Mix "busy" days with "home" days — try not to plan two big outings in a row.
- Give the week a rhythm, e.g. "Tuesday is park day", "Friday is film day".

Our week

Copy or print this page and fill it in together each weekend.

Day	Morning	Afternoon	Calm time
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Heat, sun and sensory survival

Some autistic children don't notice when they are too hot or thirsty or can't easily tell you. Others find heat, sweat and sun cream overwhelming. Watch for signs of overload — irritability, covering eyes or ears, hiding, or going very quiet.

Sense	Possible triggers	Try this
Sight	Bright sunshine, glare, light evenings	Sunglasses and a peaked cap, shady routes, blackout blinds at bedtime
Sound	Ice-cream vans, lawnmowers, crowds, wasps, fireworks	Ear defenders, quieter times of day, explain and show sounds in advance
Touch	Sun cream, sweat, shorts, sandals, swimwear, sand	Spray or roll-on sun cream, let your child apply it, practise wearing summer clothes at home
Smell	Barbecues, sun cream, cut grass, chlorine	Unscented sun cream, a familiar comfort item, stand upwind
Temperature	Overheating, not noticing thirst	Visual drink reminders, cool flannels, a fan, plan around the hottest part of the day

Keeping cool and safe

- Offer cold drinks regularly — a visual drinks chart or timer can help children who don't notice thirst.
- Plan outdoor play for mornings and late afternoons and stay in the shade in the middle of the day.
- Choose light, loose cotton clothes your child finds comfortable, a hat and sunglasses.
- Keep curtains closed on sunny sides of the house during the day.

Signs of heat exhaustion

Tiredness, weakness, dizziness, headache, cramps, feeling sick, heavy sweating and intense thirst. Move your child somewhere cool, give water and cool their skin. Call **NHS 111** if you are worried, or **999** if you think it is heatstroke — for example confusion, a fast heartbeat, or hot skin that isn't sweating.

→ Heatwave advice (Guy's and St Thomas' NHS)

Sleep in the light evenings

- Blackout blinds or curtains help the bedroom feel like night-time.
- Keep the bedtime routine the same, even if it is still light outside.
- A fan can add cool air and steady "white noise".

Water safety

Many autistic children love water and find it calming — but autistic children are at a **higher risk of drowning**. They may wander away from busy places towards water, may not understand the danger, and swimming skills learned in a pool don't always carry over to lakes, rivers or the sea.

Keep your child safe around water

- **Watch all the time.** Keep your child in sight around any water, and within arm's reach in the water.
- **Block access at home.** Empty paddling pools and buckets after use, keep bathroom doors closed and cover ponds and water butts.
- **Know the local water.** Many parks have lakes and ponds — swimming in park lakes is not allowed and they can be deep and cold.
- **Teach water rules** with pictures, e.g. "We only go in the water with a grown-up".
- **Swimming lessons** with a teacher experienced in working with autistic children can build skills and confidence.
- **Plan for wandering:** dress your child in bright clothes on days out, carry a recent photo, and consider an ID band with your phone number.

→ Autism and drowning – facts and tips (Royal Life Saving Society Australia)

Days out and trips

- Look at photos and maps of the place together beforehand and show how you will get there.
- Go early — mornings are usually quieter and cooler.
- Pack a calm kit: water, snacks, sun cream, hat, ear defenders, sunglasses, comfort item, spare clothes.
- Agree a meeting point and what your child should do if they get lost.
- Know where toilets, shade and quiet spots are, and agree a signal for "I need to go".
- Ask about carer tickets, quiet times and access passes — many venues offer them.
- Some families find a Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lanyard helps staff understand.

Going on holiday?

Make a holiday social story with photos of where you are staying, how you will travel and what you will do each day. Pack familiar things from home — bedding, cups, toys and favourite foods can make a new place feel safer. Airports and many travel companies offer assistance for autistic travellers; contact them before you go.

Activities at home

Simple, low-cost activities give the holidays some shape and help your child regulate. Many can be done in a garden, on a balcony, or indoors with a towel down. Follow your child's lead and stop while it is still fun.

Always supervise, especially around water and with small items that could be swallowed.

Sensory play

Water play tray

You'll need: Washing-up bowl or tray, cups, jugs, sponges, funnels, a few plastic toys

How: Pour, fill, squeeze and splash outdoors or on a towel. Add bubbles or a few drops of food colouring.

★ *Calming and absorbing. Always supervise and empty the water after play.*

Ice painting

You'll need: Ice-cube tray, water, food colouring or paint, lolly sticks, paper

How: Freeze coloured water with sticks in. Paint with the ice cubes as they melt.

★ *A cooling activity for hot days — watch the colours mix.*

Bubble time

You'll need: Bubble mixture and wands, or washing-up liquid and water

How: Blow, chase, pop and catch bubbles. Try giant bubbles with two straws and string.

★ *Slow blowing helps calm breathing; popping is great for visual tracking.*

Mud kitchen

You'll need: Old pots, spoons, soil, water, leaves, petals

How: Mix up "mud pies", "soup" and "cakes" in the garden or on a balcony tray.

★ *Offer gloves or tools for children who dislike messy hands.*

Sensory nature walks

You'll need: Small bag or egg box, a picture checklist

How: Collect smooth stones, soft feathers, rough bark and leaves. Talk about how each one feels.

★ *A purpose for a walk helps it feel predictable.*

Frozen fruit treats

You'll need: Fruit your child likes, yoghurt or juice, ice-lolly moulds

How: Chop, blend or layer and freeze. Enjoy as a cool snack.

★ *Cold, crunchy textures are alerting — and a safe way to cool down.*

Fine motor fun

Fine motor activities use the small muscles in the hands and fingers — the skills needed for dressing, eating and writing. The holidays are a good time to keep these skills going in a playful way.

Pipette colour transfer

You'll need: Pipettes or droppers, cups of coloured water, ice-cube tray

How: Suck up coloured water and drop it into the tray. Mix colours to make new ones.

★ *Squeezing builds the finger strength needed for writing.*

Peg painting

You'll need: Clothes pegs, pom-poms or sponge pieces, paint, paper

How: Clip a pom-pom in a peg and dab paint to make flowers, suns or rainbows.

★ *Opening pegs works the same muscles as using scissors.*

Nature collage

You'll need: Card, glue stick or sticky-back plastic, leaves, petals, grass

How: Arrange and stick treasures from your walk into a picture or a pattern.

★ *Picking up small items' practises pincer grip.*

Chalk drawing

You'll need: Chunky pavement chalk

How: Draw on the patio or pavement — roads for cars, faces, patterns. Wash away with water.

★ *Drawing on the ground strengthens shoulders, arms and wrists.*

Sponge squeeze race

You'll need: Two bowls, a sponge, water

How: Soak the sponge in one bowl and squeeze it into the other. How fast can you move the water?

★ *Great hand strengthener and a fun cool-down.*

Threading and lacing

You'll need: Pasta, beads or cut straws, string or pipe cleaners

How: Make bracelets, necklaces or a summer garland.

★ *Tape the string end to make threading easier for beginners.*

Make it easier or harder

- **Easier:** bigger pieces, chunky chalk, thicker string, fewer items, hand-over-hand help.
- **Harder:** smaller beads, copying a pattern, using tweezers, timing the activity.

Gross motor and movement

Big-body movement helps many autistic children feel calm and organised. “Heavy work” — pushing, pulling, carrying, climbing and jumping — is especially regulating. On hot days, move active play to the morning or evening.

Sprinkler or hose run

You’ll need: Garden sprinkler, hose or watering can

How: Run, jump and dodge the water on a hot day. Let your child control the water if they prefer.

★ *Some children love the sensation; others need to watch first. Go at their pace.*

Garden obstacle course

You’ll need: Hoops, cones, buckets, a blanket, chalk lines

How: Crawl, jump, balance and weave. Draw a picture map of the course.

★ *Let your child design the route — it builds planning skills.*

Wet sponge throw

You’ll need: Sponges, a bucket of water, a target (bucket or chalk circle)

How: Soak the sponges and throw at the target. Move further back to make it harder.

★ *A safe, cooling throwing game with lots of heavy work.*

Chalk hopscotch

You’ll need: Pavement chalk

How: Draw a hopscotch grid or a path of shapes to jump, hop and stomp along.

★ *Builds balance and coordination; add numbers or colours to call out.*

Bikes, scooters and balance

You’ll need: Bike, scooter or balance bike, helmet

How: Ride round a quiet park path or playground loop.

★ *A familiar, predictable route helps children feel confident.*

Kite or streamer run

You’ll need: Kite, or ribbons tied to a stick

How: Run across an open field to make the kite or streamers fly.

★ *Wide open spaces such as country parks are ideal.*

Rainy or too-hot day?

Take the movement indoors: animal walks, a cushion obstacle course, balloon keep-up, or a dance-and-freeze game. Libraries, museums and indoor play sessions also offer cool, calm places to go.

Getting ready for September

Starting a new class or school is one of the biggest changes of the year. A gradual, visual approach in the last few weeks of the holidays can make the return much easier.

Two to three weeks before

- Add the first day back to the summer calendar and start a countdown.
- Look at photos of the new classroom, teacher, entrance and playground — many schools share a transition booklet.
- Walk or drive the school route once or twice so it feels familiar.
- Try on uniform and wear new shoes around the house to get used to them. Remove scratchy labels.

The last week

- Move bedtime and wake-up time back towards school times, a little each day.
- Use a social story about the first day: who will meet them, where they go, what happens at lunch and home time.
- Pack the bag together and lay out the uniform the night before.
- Plan a calm, familiar after-school routine for the first few days — tiredness is normal.

> **Talk to school**
> If your child has an EHC plan or SEN support, ask the SENCo before the holidays end about transition support, a quiet start, or an extra visit. Share what has helped over the summer.

Holiday clubs and sessions

Holiday programmes change every year. These pages link to where each one is published — **check them from late spring for summer dates and booking**.

What	Details	Link
Barking & Dagenham HAF	Free holiday activities and food for 5–16-year-olds who live or go to school in the borough and get benefit-related free school meals. Paid places are open to all. Booking is essential. Questions: hafprogramme@lbbd.gov.uk	LBBD free holiday activities
Havering HAF	Free places for Reception to Year 11 on benefit-related free school meals; children with an EHC plan registered with Havering Short Breaks can be referred. Providers are rated by SEND support level (1–4) — choose one that matches your child and contact them at least two weeks before.	Havering HAF
Redbridge Holiday Fun (HAF)	Free places for Reception to Year 11 on benefit-related free school meals, or by professional referral. Providers must be inclusive; specialist SEND places are listed when available. Questions: haf@redbridge.gov.uk	Redbridge Holiday Fun
Peaceful Play — Oxygen Romford	Autism-friendly trampoline sessions for ages 5+: fewer jumpers, music down, no strobe lights. Usually Wednesdays 4.30–6pm and Sundays 5–6pm (times can change in school holidays). £8 including a carer.	Oxygen Peaceful Play
Owls Play Centre SEN session — Fairlop Waters	Indoor soft play for children with special needs and their families, first Saturday of the month, 8.30–10am (not August).	Redbridge indoor activities
Summer Reading Challenge	Free reading challenge for 4–11-year-olds at your local library, July to September. Collect stickers and rewards for reading anything your child enjoys — a cool, quiet place to go on hot days.	Summer Reading Challenge
Autism-friendly cinema	Lights up, sound down, no adverts and freedom to move. Cineworld screenings run roughly monthly; Vue (including Romford) usually on the last Sunday of the month.	Cineworld Accessibility Information | Legal | Vue Cinemas

Barking & Dagenham

Barking Park
Longbridge Road, Barking IG11 8UD

Home to the **Splashy Land splash park** in summer, plus a lake with boat hire, play area, café, visitor centre and toilets.

Calm tip: The splash park gets busy on hot afternoons — try opening time or a cloudy day.

→ Barking Park

Eastbrookend Country Park
The Chase, Dagenham RM7 0SS

Large nature reserve with lakes, wide paths and wildlife. Toilets and a car park on site — great for bug hunts, picnics and quiet walks.

Calm tip: Bring a picture checklist of things to spot.

→ Eastbrookend Country Park

Mayesbrook Park
180 Lodge Avenue, Dagenham RM8 2JR

Lakes, a nature reserve, children's play area, trim trail and outdoor gym, with a car park.

Calm tip: Plenty of space to spread out away from the busier areas.

→ Mayesbrook Park

Valence House Museum
Becontree Avenue, Dagenham RM8 3HT

Free museum with a herb garden, a WW2 "Dig for Victory" garden and Anderson shelter, and the Tulip Tree Tearoom with garden seating. Look out for family activities in the holidays.

Calm tip: Cool indoor rooms are a good break on a hot day.

→ Valence House Museum

Havering

Harrow Lodge Park
Hornchurch Road, Hornchurch RM11 1JR

Havering's largest park, with a lake and pedal boats, two play areas, a parkour course, a trim trail, a café and toilets.

Calm tip: Choose the play area furthest from the busiest paths for a calmer visit.

→ Harrow Lodge Park

Raphael Park
Main Road, Romford RM2 5EB

Ornamental lake, a large, fenced play area, a restaurant and kiosk, and toilets.

Calm tip: The fenced play area helps if your child tends to run off.

→ Raphael Park

Bedfords Park and Nature Discovery Centre
Broxhill Road, Havering-atte-Bower RM4 1QL

Red deer, a natural playground and maze, big views, and an Essex Wildlife Trust centre with a café, accessible toilet and outdoor play area. Summer opening 10am–5pm.

Calm tip: Watching the deer is a lovely calm, quiet activity.

→ Bedfords Park Nature Discovery Centre

Thames Chase Forest Centre
Pike Lane, Upminster RM14 3NS

Shady woodland walks, an easy-access trail, inclusive play areas, an adventure trail and a café. Accessible toilets and parking (suggested £3 donation).

Calm tip: Woodland shade makes this a good choice on warm days.

→ Thames Chase Forest Centre

Redbridge

Fairlop Waters Country Park
Near Fairlop and Barkingside stations (Central line)

Lakes, walking routes, a large natural play area, a boulder park, watersports at the Outdoor Activity Centre, the Boathouse café and Owls indoor play centre.

Calm tip: Walk the lake path for a predictable loop — and keep close by the water.

→ Fairlop Waters Country Park

Hainault Forest Country Park
Hainault / Chigwell Row

Ancient woodland with Foxburrows Farm (rare-breed animals), a boating lake, an adventure play area and the 1856 Café.

Calm tip: Visit the animals first thing, before it gets busy and hot.

→ Hainault Forest Country Park

Valentines Mansion and Gardens
Valentines Park, Ilford

Walled gardens and the Gardener's Cottage Café, open every day, plus a free historic mansion (Sundays and Mondays, 12–5pm from March to October) with children's activities. A new lido with a children's splash pad is being built in the park.

Calm tip: The walled gardens are a peaceful, contained space.

→ Valentines Mansion and Gardens

Redbridge Museum
Redbridge Central Library, Ilford

Free indoor museum with interactive exhibits, puzzles, games, a mammoth skull replica and an under-fives area with dress-up and a London bus.

Calm tip: A cool, quiet option for hot or rainy days — pair it with the library.

→ Redbridge Museum

Support and useful links

You don't have to get through the summer alone. These organisations can offer advice, activities and support.

Who	How they can help	Link
Sycamore Trust UK — Family Services	Support, information and advocacy for families of autistic children, young people and adults, including parent support groups. Tel: 020 8517 9317	Home - Sycamore Trust
Barking & Dagenham SEND Local Offer	Services, activities and support for children and young people with SEND in Barking and Dagenham.	localoffer.lbbd.gov.uk
Havering SEND Local Offer	Havering's one-stop shop for SEND information, services and short breaks.	Havering Local Offer
Redbridge SEND Local Offer	What is available in Redbridge for 0–25-year-olds with SEND and their families.	find.redbridge.gov.uk/localoffer
NHS heat advice	How to keep cool and spot heat exhaustion and heatstroke.	Heatwave advice

If things feel too much

Long holidays can be exhausting for parents and carers. If you are struggling, talk to someone you trust, contact your GP, or get in touch with the Sycamore Trust Family Services team. In an emergency always call 999.

Information in this guide was checked in October 2026. Holiday programmes, opening times and prices change each year — please check with venues and organisers before you go. Activities should always be supervised by an adult.

Wishing you a calm and happy summer from all of us at Sycamore Trust UK