

Wings for All Helping Special Needs Travelers

Airport Trial Run is Prep for Future Travel



On a perfect spring day in April, dozens of families arrived at Charlotte Douglas International Airport to board a flight to nowhere. It was a dress rehearsal of sorts, designed to introduce a select group of children to the air travel experience.

The Airport can be a chaotic place for anyone, but for people with autism and other intellectual and development disabilities, it can be confusing and scary.

That's why Delta Air Lines and [The Arc](#) host Wings for All at CLT and other airports across the nation. It gives families a chance to become familiar with the unique process of air travel without the real-life stress that sometimes goes along with it.

Navigating the Airport

Crystal Isenhour drove to CLT from Cabarrus County with her daughter, Lyla, so she could get used to the unusual sounds at the Airport. Lyla, who is 15 years old, has an auditory processing disorder.

"It's very loud in an Airport," Crystal said. "When we get on (the plane) and the engines come up, that can be quite scary for a kid. So, when we can give them some repetition, when they can become familiar with sounds, they can be excited about coming to the Airport instead of scared."

Lyla wheeled her carry-on bag around confidently and handled the new adventure like a pro.

Even though this was her first time in an airport, Lyla knew what was going to happen at the gate, thanks to some TikTok videos she had watched and a "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" book she had read.

Still, Lyla learned a lot during these three hours.

"I learned how to check in, I learned where to go," Lyla said. "I learned when you go through security you have to put your phone in (the bin) too."

Knowledge is Power

After arriving at the Airport, families waited in line at the Delta counter. They had to show their identification, put a tag on their bags and collect their boarding passes.

During each step of the way, Crystal calmly explained to Lyla exactly what they were doing and why. You have to show your ID to prove you are the person whose name is on the ticket. You have to put a tag on your bag with your name and phone number on it in case it gets lost, the person who finds it can contact you.

Knowledge is power for Lyla and many of the other kids at the event. It's the unknown that can be unnerving.

When they went through security screening, officers pulled Crystal aside to inspect her orthopedic boot.

"Did you see all the special stuff they did?" Crystal asked Lyla.

"Yeah, if you have a boot on or something, they have to make sure you're not hiding anything in it," Lyla replied.

"So, why did they do that?" Crystal asked.

"Because on the airplane, you're like in midair and somebody could just be like, 'give me your stuff,' "

Lyla said, making a finger gun gesture.

"Right," Crystal said. "To keep you safe."

Expect the Unexpected

Crystal knew the Wings for All event would be beneficial for Lyla. She previously brought her older daughter, Sienna, through the program. Sienna, who is 18 years old, has autism.

"It was such a great test for her. Just being able to come and experience (the Airport) before it's a necessary thing," Crystal said.

During the Wings for All event, there were friendly volunteers at every turn, special signs directing guests where to go and members of the CLT Canine Crew to help the kids feel at ease. At the gate, participants were treated to chicken fingers and french fries with big cookies for dessert.

"You guys have made it wonderful for them, to make them comfortable," Crystal said. "The second time won't be as easy."

That's why Crystal made a point of explaining to Lyla what to do if something unexpected happens. Why it's important to check the information boards, what to do if a gate assignment changes, why flights are sometimes delayed and what to do if she couldn't hear an overhead announcement.

Ready for Take-off

After eating dinner at the gate, the participants boarded the plane in sections. They scanned their boarding passes and learned how to find their seat assignment.

Once everyone was settled, the pilot drove the airplane around the airfield. He even sped up to give the kids a taste of what it feels like and sounds like when a plane is taking off.

CLT fire trucks performed a ceremonial water canon salute as the plane headed back to the gate, spraying the plane with an arch of water in celebration of the journey.


A Successful Trip

On the drive home, Lyla thanked her mom for taking her to the Airport. She told her dad all about meeting the maintenance crew and seeing some of their equipment.

Lyla said the highlights of the night were getting to try out the flight attendant's jump seat and collecting trading cards from the CLT Canine Crew members.

The only thing that Lyla did not like about Wings for All was that they were not actually flying somewhere. She hopes to visit France, Hawaii and Disney World in the future.

Visit [The Arc website](#) to learn more about the organization and its [Wings for All](#) program.

Additional assets available online:  **Photos** (8)

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