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Air Canada employees spearhead Open Skies for Autism, which aims to ease the anxiety of flying



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For some people, going to the airport to catch a flight can sometimes be a stressful experience.

Now imagine living that experience through the eyes of someone living with autism.

For one Air Canada flight attendant, whose daughter is on the autism spectrum, the experience of someone close to her prompted her to act, culminating in the first Open Skies for Autism event being held on Nov. 9.

“When my daughter’s best-friend and her mother told me about their first attempt on a flight, she explained that her daughter became so overwhelmed that she ran away at the airport. This was distressing for both the mother and daughter, and they chose not to fly, never attempting it again. My daughter tried to assure her friend that the airport experience was the most overwhelming for children, and convinced her to try once more,” said Merav Richter, who has been a Flight Attendant with Air Canada for 25 years.

Flying for a living, Richter was determined to help families who live with autism learn more about air travel so they can feel confident and eventually have the freedom to take a family vacation on an airplane.

That’s when the idea of Open Skies for Autism was born.

With the help of the Air Canada Foundation, which has the well-being of kids at heart, Richter has put together an event that allows participants, be that people with autism or their families, to experience a realistic environment from check-in in, through boarding an aircraft, going for a short airplane taxi ride and deplaning.

After arriving at the airport, participants are greeted by volunteers and checked-in for their “special flight.” After passing security, participants will board an Air Canada aircraft where a team of 10 volunteer flight attendants and three pilots walk them through the normal pre-flight routines of every Air Canada flight.

Once everyone is comfortably seated with their seat belts fastened, the Airbus A320 will be pushed back from the gate and taxied around Pearson Airport for 30 minutes. After returning to the gate, passengers will be allowed to visit the flight deck where pilots will answer any questions they have.

“It is always great to see a group of employees come together to help their communities. The Air Canada Foundation is proud to provide support to these amazing individuals who worked really hard to provide a memorable and positive experience for the children and their families. We look forward to introducing these families to air travel and welcoming them onboard in future,” said Valerie Durand representing the Air Canada Foundation.

“Within one hour of opening registration - all the allotted seats were filled. There is now a waiting list,” Richter said.





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