

The journey within the journey: How traveling with special needs children affects families

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Objectives | This study aims to analyze the effects of family tourism trips on families with children with special needs (FwCwSN). Despite the crucial role that families play in providing support for children with disabilities - physical, visual, hearing, and intellectual (Kim & Lehto, 2013), the number of studies on the effects of family tourism on FwCwSN is very scarce (Columna et al., 2011). However, the limited literature in this field highlights, on the one hand, the significant challenges that families face in undertaking tourism trips, given that tourism destinations and services are not accessible, and on the other hand, the high benefits for both the family and children with special needs (Kim & Lehto, 2013), obtained from tourism experiences. To expand our understanding of the effects of family tourism trips on FwCwSN, this study employs a qualitative approach to investigate: (i) the positive effects of family tourism on the family as a whole, as well as on individual family members (children with special needs and parents); (ii) the negative effects of family tourism trips; and (iii) whether there are differences in the effects (positive and negative) according to the type of special needs of the children and the type of tourism experience.

Methodology | The effects of family tourism trips are examined through a qualitative study carried out in April 2024. First, various online forums and blogs (e.g. Tribe on a Quest, Raising the Extraordinary, A Day in Our Shoes, Holidays with Kids) related to travel experiences of families with children with special needs were collected and analyzed. Second, the qualitative data collected from online sources underwent content analysis, considering the potential effects identified in the literature (Columna et al., 2011; Mactavish & Schleien, 1998). The effects were categorized according to their nature into two groups: (i) positive effects and (ii) negative effects. Additionally, the effects were categorized according to the entity influenced into three groups: (i) the family as a whole; (ii) children with special needs; (iii) parents. Finally, the different effects were compared

according to the type of special needs of the children and the type of tourism activity carried out by the family.

Main results and contributions | The analysis of testimonies indicates that family tourism trips have both positive and negative effects on families with children with special needs (FwCwSN). When considering the family as a whole, many online posts highlight the strengthening of family connections, the creation of memories together, the expansion of the family's perspectives, the opportunity to feel as a "normal" family, and the importance of involving healthy siblings in destination choices, so that they feel that the holiday is for the family and not only for the child with disability. Nevertheless, travelling with a child with special needs presents significant challenges. When the disability is physical (noticeable), the group frequently encounters prejudice from others. Autistic children frequently experience meltdowns and feelings of unhappiness due to the change in routines, which creates difficulties for the entire family. Regardless of the type of disability, there is always a negative impact on healthy siblings due to the special requirements and restrictions during travel. In addition to the aforementioned adverse effects, a child with disabilities may experience feelings of sadness when destinations, facilities or attractions lack the physical and environmental conditions to welcome them and accommodate their needs. Nevertheless, the most notable impact is the positive effect on children with special needs. This is evident in their inclusion in family activities, both during holidays and in pre-travel planning. However, the most significant observation is the progress that can be made. Children with special needs demonstrate happiness and positive feelings, becoming more active and interested in exploring new places and experiencing new realities. This increases their learning abilities. Of particular relevance to children on the autism spectrum is the improvement in social skills, which can be observed as a result of increased social activity and emotional stability when exposed to outdoor environments. Finally, the most significant impacts for parents are, on the positive side, the opportunity to escape from daily pressures and demanding routines focused almost exclusively on the child's needs, allowing them to have some fun and family quality time. This positively influences mental health and the motivation to continue with daily lives. However, negative situations may emerge. Even before the holidays, the highly demanding pre-travel planning and arrangements can be very stressful. During travel, the most frequent negative situations derive from the potential for criticism regarding the decision to bring special needs children into public view, in addition to the overwhelming feelings of guilt that may arise when children experience meltdowns, particularly when they are on the autism spectrum.

Limitations | Despite the significant relevance of the present study in addressing the research gap regarding the tourism experiences of families with children with special needs (FwCwSN) and its considerable theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations may be identified. First,

despite the novelty of the method used to collect the data, this study relies solely on online comments from a sample of blogs and forums. Therefore, further studies utilizing complementary qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, should be conducted, as well as studies employing quantitative methods. Additionally, only comments written in English were examined.

Conclusions | The present research yields important theoretical contributions, revealing multiple and relevant benefits of tourism trips with children with special needs for the different members of the family. These benefits range from escaping from traveling routine, to “opening” highly valued opportunities to explore new places, developing children's skills and fostering family togetherness. However, these trips also bring many challenges to these families, with the nature of both obstacle and benefits varying with the type of disability and the experience lived. Moreover, the study also provides relevant practical implications, particularly for the tourism industry. It highlights the importance of creating inclusive environments adapted to the specific needs of children and families.

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