

Traveling with Children

Whether it's a two-hour car trip to visit relatives or a cross-country flight for a two-week vacation, traveling with children requires preparation. Besides car and booster seats for safe travel, games and books to help entertain children and a mini first aid kit to handle motion sickness, altitude changes, minor injuries and water-less clean-ups, Parenting Press authors recommend you plan ahead for

- **Impatience and disappointment**
- **Conflicts over sharing and limited personal space**
- **Safety in crowds and unfamiliar locations**

Creating Realistic Expectations

"Disneyland, Disneyland, Disneyland! I can't wait until we go to Disneyland," your 5-year-old may be chanting. Or it's the 10-year-old telling all the neighbors, "I'm going to sleep in a tent and catch SO many fish!" Perhaps you're setting off to celebrate the grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary or it's an unplanned flight to attend a family funeral.

Whatever the purpose of a trip—even a quick stop at the grocery store—explain it in advance to toddlers and older children. Create realistic expectations by saying, "We'll go by Thriftway so that I can get milk. You can push the little cart for me and I bet it won't take us more than 10 minutes. And, remember, we don't get candy, no matter how good it looks."

Describe what has to happen before the trip. "Before we can load the car for camping, we have to clean it out and then we have to check all our gear and make sure we have fuel for the stove and lanterns. You can help by . . ."

Describe the trip. "We'll drive to our airport and then we'll take an airplane to a very large airport and then we'll ride in a little van to a hotel."

Describe the events. Use terms appropriate to your children's ages and developmental levels and explain their roles. "There will be a party at the downtown hotel, with lots of older people that Grandma and Grandpa will want to introduce you to. This is a very fancy party, so you will wear your dress-up clothes and stay with Mom and Dad."



Coach children about what to say. This can be as simple as, "Please," "Thank you," and "Where is the bathroom?" Review polite ways to ask for something when visiting family or friends: "May I have more water?"

Prepare children for what they will see and hear. "At the zoo, some animals are huge and some are very, very noisy. If you are scared, remember the animals cannot get out of their cages, and that I will be there to hold your hand." "At the airport, we take our shoes off and walk through a special machine. Sometimes the machine makes noise if people have big belt buckles or lots of coins in their pockets, but it can't hurt us."

Especially if children will be traveling because of a family health crisis or attending a funeral, provide factual information before you arrive so that the children avoid gruesome questions. If children will be speaking to the bereaved, suggest something like, "I'm so sorry to hear about your loss." If your children are among the bereaved, prepare them to respond with a comment such as, "Thank you for coming" or "I know you were one of Grandma's best friends."

Play "What If . . ." Before You Go

Develop alternate plans. Preschool and older children can brainstorm ideas for changes caused by weather, budget, delays or other surprises. Your kids can suggest games, books and hobby supplies (spool knitting, sketchbook, card decks) to take along. If you're creating a day-by-day schedule for your trip, pencil in second-choice activities for each day so a sudden storm or sold-out game doesn't ruin the fun.

Review safety lessons. With young children, use a book like Elizabeth Crary's *I'm Lost* to discuss what you want your kids to do if they become separated from you or the other adults in your group. In this book, the main character knows to:

- stay where she is and her parents will find her
- ask a police or security officer for help
- ask a woman with small children to find help
- ask a store clerk or cashier to find her parents

Modify these guidelines to fit your family and your trip. At an airport a child also could approach an airline employee. At a museum, a docent leading a tour, the gift store clerk or the front desk staff could provide help. At a campground, a ranger.

Tell your children how you want them to respond if they are approached by a stranger, especially if they appear to be alone—in a public restroom, for example. Most experts recommend that children be taught to scream loudly, “You’re not my father/mother!” if grabbed by a stranger.

Rules and Consequences

Most families have special rules—or a special emphasis on “regular” rules—when traveling. Be careful to explain these rules and the reasons for them, writes Shari Steelsmith in *Go To Your Room: Consequences That Teach*. “Don’t assume they know [the reasons] because they seem obvious to you.”

Steelsmith makes a suggestion that works well as a pre-trip exercise: after you describe travel rules, ask your children to tell you the reasons for these. Reinforce the right reasons and provide more information if children are unsure. “That’s right, you hold my hand or my leg when we have to stand in the airport” or “You must sit in your seat and speak quietly in restaurants.”

Steelsmith’s book lists dozens of common problems which can surface when away from home. Backtalk, for example, “Children try backtalking because they are looking for ways to feel important and will often find it in power-seeking and attention-getting behavior,” she writes.

Dealing with backtalk while in transit is difficult because you cannot separate yourself from the child. However, try Steelsmith’s technique of interrupting the backtalk and warning, “Start over.” Or calmly ask, “Do you really think that tone of voice will get you what you want?” A third option: require that the child apologize to the parent.

Another likely problem is sibling conflict. Steelsmith points out that kids often practice such skills as establishing boundaries and using personal power on family members. Try to determine what is causing one child to mistreat another. “Is he feeling powerless in other relationships (perhaps with a cousin) and taking it out on this one? Is he bored and looking for excitement?”

Because it is difficult to separate children when traveling, consider making the misbehaving child rephrase her comments two or three times in a positive way. Or say that because the children need practice getting along, they must play 10-20 minutes of a game nicely while you supervise.

Other common issues while traveling include:

Misbehavior in the car. Possible consequences: no more “kid” music, loss of the window seat, the car stops if anyone’s seat belt is unfastened or if everyone is unruly. Curb problems by

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reviewing car rules every morning and by either assigning seats or rotating the favorite seat.

Won’t eat meals. Short-circuit this, especially when visiting in homes where the meals are very different, by teaching children what to say when offered things they don’t like: “No, thank you. May I have extra potatoes instead?” Make sure that your child understands that there will be no snacking later if he does not eat at the meal.

Misbehaves in restaurants. Talk about “restaurant rules” before you go in, and give your child something to eat immediately—a light snack you bring, crackers or a glass of milk. Have quiet toys or paper and crayons for entertainment. If a child does misbehave, he should be warned once and then taken out to the lobby or the car. Parents can trade off sitting with the child so that both get to finish their meals.

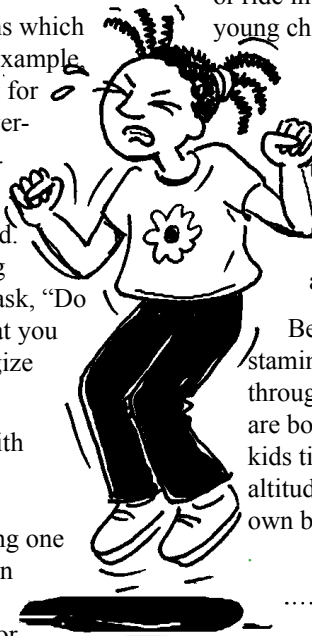
Runs off. Review the rules with young children each time you get out of the car: “Now remember, you need to hold my hand or ride in the stroller while we walk through the zoo.” Very young children can wear a harness or wrist leash.

Summary

Traveling with children means being sensitive to their needs and the disruption to their schedules that travel causes.

Ideally, a car trip will be leisurely, with several stops at playgrounds, and a plane trip will be a direct flight.

Be realistic about children’s attention spans and stamina and make alternate plans for kids who cannot sit through adult receptions or long church services and who are bored by shopping trips or art galleries. Remember that kids tire out when on long tours or hikes, especially at high altitudes, and they become irritable when they miss their own beds and familiar meals.



Other Resources

Crary, Elizabeth. Children’s Problem Solving six-book series, including *I’m Lost*, *I Want It* and *I Can’t Wait*, 1996

Faull, Jan and Helen F. Neville. *Mommy! I Have to Go Potty!* (rev. ed.), Parenting Press, 2009

“Helping Children Acknowledge Loss and Grief,” by Linda Carlson, *Parenting Education Practitioners Talk*, Issue 26, Fall 2004, available at www.ParentingPress.com/peptalk.html

Neville, Helen F. *Is This a Phase?* Parenting Press, 2008.

Steelsmith, Shari. *Go To Your Room: Consequences That Teach*, Parenting Press, 2000.