

Airline Traveling with Kids: Flying without Fear

By: Deborah Abrams Kaplan

Before we had kids, we saw those pathetic families in airports with mountains of luggage, screaming kids and bags not only streaming behind them, but dragging down their eyelids. Yes, we felt a little sorry for them. But mostly we hoped they weren't sitting near us.

And now we're them. Follow these steps, and any passenger will be happy as your seat mate.

The best flights. This is a no-brainer. Fly direct if at all possible. Do it even if it costs you more. A lot more. Child time on airplanes is like dog time. Each hour feels like seven hours.

Checking the carseat. Let's say you'll need a carseat at your destination. Do you check it as luggage or bring it on board? It depends.

If you paid for a seat, bring it on board and strap it in. Aside from safety, the advantage is that your child might actually fall asleep on the plane. And that makes it easier for you to use the restroom and eat the delicious airline peanuts.

For older kids, it's a toss up. My 4 year old is just as happy sitting in the seat with the safety belt, and it's one less thing to lug through the airport.

We often check the carseats with the luggage. The airlines put the seats in clear plastic bags, so they arrive clean.

Security

If you check-in electronically don't make the mistake of checking in all the luggage on one ticket. Make sure everyone with a ticket has a bag checked under their name, or you might go through additional security checks.

To get through screening easily, wear shoes with no laces, and remove them in security. Don't wear a belt – it's not worth it. Count your carry-ons before sending them through the x-ray machine so you know how many you need at the end.

Boarding

Contrary to popular belief, not all airlines let you board early. Southwest Airlines lets you on first. But American? You, your carseats, backpacks, and 50 pounds of "must have" carry-on luggage boards with everyone else.

But boarding early is overrated. Do you really want to feel trapped for another 30 minutes? Sure you can be the first to stuff that overhead bin with your winter coat. But if your child is mobile, that extra time on the plane is no fun for you or junior. My advice? Board LAST. Let junior get out some energy on that clean, hygienic airport carpet. Send

Dad on early with the stuff if you're worried. Or better yet, limit your carry-ons and use the space underneath the seat in front of you.

Lap child or extra seat?

Purchasing seats for kids under two is not required by the airlines. For these kids, you'll pay half the cost of your ticket on most airlines (but your baby can earn full frequent flyer miles). Over age two, you'll pay full fare.

In the olden days (pre-9/11), families could easily snag an empty seat for their child. It might not be next to you, but surely some kind passenger with grandkids would sacrifice by moving so your screaming bundle could have a seat to call her own. These days, assume the plane will be full. If there's a spare seat, buy a lottery ticket when exiting the plane. It's your lucky day.

Purchasing a seat does not guarantee your child will sit in it. But you'll have a place for toys, food and sweaters, and your child has one less person to poke and prod during the flight (of course the people in front of and behind you are still fair game).

Internationally, you'll pay fees for your child if you don't buy a seat. A friend took her baby to England and it cost her \$100 for her lap child. And she suffered the entire trip, swearing she'd buy a seat for her baby on her next overseas flight.

Some airlines require you to show a birth certificate for your lap child, to ensure he is under age two. Make a copy and put it with your flight information, so you won't be forced to buy a last-minute ticket for him if the check-in agent can't tell a three month old from a three year old.

Entertaining Junior

While the standard goody bag of toys is helpful, parents ignore the hidden treasures already on the plane: barf bags, laminated airline safety cards, in-flight shopping magazines (with pictures of kids and toys), in-flight snack packets (they have texture, noise and don't hurt if thrown), plastic cups from the beverage cart and headphones.

Bring along crayons and stickers to transform the barf bag into a puppet. Blow bubbles in the aisle – other kids will appreciate it too. Use the airline magazine photos to make up stories. The headphones are fun as-is, and many airlines have kids' music as a selection. Bring or rent a portable DVD player for an older child.

Get creative. On one miserable flight with a screaming two year old (ours) we were so desperate we actually gave her a beer can to play with. We got some strange looks, but it kept her entertained long enough for us to drink the other beer.

Happy Child/Happy Parent

A little bribe goes a long way to make flying easier. Figure out what it would take for your child to behave on a flight – whether it's stickers, M&Ms, or a Hot Wheels car at the

end of the flight. And remind Junior when he starts whining that he only gets his special treat if he behaves.

Bring food, even if its being served on the flight. Your plane could be late. They could have changed your flight into a “pretzels only” fiasco. Sandwiches, yogurt, cheese sticks, goldfish, carrots - we bring it all.

I know some of you are going to shake your heads at this, but some parents give their kids Benedryl to help them sleep during the flight. I’m not taking a stand (though it hasn’t worked for me). If you consider doing this, ask your doctor the correct dose for your child. Try it out ahead of time. Some children have the opposite reaction, becoming hyperactive, not sedated, with Benedryl’s use.

I highly recommend a carrying device like a Bjorn Bjorn or sling for the flight, if your child is under one year, or is lightweight. The Bjorn (and other front-carriers) cannot be worn during take off and landing (we’ve been caught numerous times, but it *is* an FAA regulation). All other times are fine. Having your child quiet is invaluable. Having your hands free during that time is golden.

What to bring

Bring a lightweight stroller, preferably one with a basket. Even if your child won’t ride in it, it doubles as an effective luggage cart in the airport. Check the stroller at the gate, and you’ll have it waiting for you at your destination gate.

Bring extra diapers, extra clothes (for parents and kids) and extra plastic bags. My daughter was talented enough to poop in her pants while sitting, avoiding the diaper altogether. She can leak through her shorts onto Dad’s khakis. And she can spill six ounces of apple juice in my lap 20 minutes into the flight. Did I mention you should bring extra clothes?

If all else fails, bring correct change for drinks in the cabin – and order them for yourselves and everyone around you. Happy trails!