



by Karen Stephens

Airplane Travel: Tips for Helping Children Enjoy It

One summer many years ago, my stepson leaned across his airplane seat onto his grandma's lap and exclaimed: "Ohhh, Grandma, it looks just like heaven out there!" At age 9, he was going cross-country to visit an uncle in Oregon. Seeing cloud tops lit up by sunbeams left quite an impression!

If your family is lucky enough to be planning an airplane trip, below are some tips to help your child fully enjoy this unique view of the sky.

Prepare for the Experience

- Before your child flies for the first time, visit the airport. It gives children "stress-free" time to become acquainted with the busy, new environment. It's ideal if kids can help "pick up" loved ones who fly in for a visit.
- A week or two before your trip, mark off "days to take off" on your family's calendar. It helps kids anticipate and mentally prepare for the event.
- Involve children in packing for the trip. Assigning them a "job" (such as packing three books to take along) will help them feel more confident and focused.
- Describe what the flight will be like. Explain how long it will take according to your child's ability to understand. For instance, for kids who can't tell time yet, you could say, "We'll be on the plane as long as it takes to watch a movie."
- Use toys such as puppets, dolls, or airport play stations to help children anticipate and rehearse the upcoming experience. When play acting, use phrases children are likely to hear: "The caption requests that you fasten your seatbelts."
- Read a book about air travel to help children anticipate events. There are many choices for children of varying ages at your library or bookstore. Watch a family video or DVD about airplane travel. Answer children's questions simply as they arise.

Snack, Comfort, and Play Supplies

Have juice and snack items on hand; it will help calm kids. Tissues and wet-wipes are handy when water is scarce. Diapers for infants, toddlers, and "just-trained" children are wise. Pacifiers for infants reduce ear pain. It's easier for kids to be patient if they have a favorite play item within reach, such as a stuffed animal, book or book on tape, doll, markers and paper, or magnetic puzzle.

Interpret Air Travel for Kids

There's more to learn about air travel than most adults realize; especially if you take flight for granted. View the flight experience through your child's eyes to anticipate their worries and calm fears.

Use toys, such as puppets, dolls or airport play stations to help children anticipate and rehearse the upcoming experience.

Just before they occur, take time to describe the new sounds and sensations children will experience, such as loud engines, the pull of gravity, and ears popping. Routine air travel sounds, such as the buzz of wheels moving during lift off and landing, can be scary if kids don't understand what's happening.

Help children become familiar with procedures of flying. Below are terms and processes that may be new to them. To avoid overwhelming children, *gradually* explain the following according to your child's age and ability to understand.

Travel personnel: ground crew, captain, co-pilot, flight attendant, air traffic controller, ticket agent, security guard. *Indoor facilities:* terminal, ticket booth, baggage check, boarding area, security check, baggage claim and carousel, ground transportation area, moving walkways, restrooms. *Outdoor facilities:* runway, traffic control tower, jetway for boarding. *Terms:* passenger, boarding pass, luggage, take off, landing, departure, arrival, turbulence, holding pattern, passport or ID card, baggage claim check. *Inside of plane:* cockpit, galley (kitchen area), aisle, lavatory, overhead compartment, cargo hold, exit, emergency exit, TV monitor, headphones. *Outside of plane:* wings, nose, tail, engines, propeller, wheels, wing flaps. *Safety features:* luggage conveyor belt, metal detector, x-ray machine, screening wand, oxygen mask, seat belts, and signs.

View the flight experience through your child's eyes to anticipate their worries and calm fears.

Listen, Accept, Empathize and Reassure

No matter how well prepared children are, they can surprise you with fears or misconceptions. After all, kids see and hear terrifying things about air travel in movies and on the news. If children express fear about flying, be respectful and empathetic; not dismissive. Listening to fears doesn't mean you agree they'll come true. If a child recalls news of a plane crash, respond and reassure: "Hearing about a plane crash is scary. We know the plane crew does everything they can to make flights safe."

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007