



by Karen Stephens

Family Travel: Making It Child-Friendly

Whether you're traveling by plane, train, or automobile (or bus or boat), following are tips to make your family travel easier on the kids, and on you.

Anticipate the Trip

- A week or two before your trip, mark off "days until we leave" on your family's calendar. It helps children anticipate and mentally prepare for the event.
- If you're traveling by car, take necessary safety precautions.
- Involve children in packing for the trip. Assign them a "job", such as packing their favorite comfort item or book.
- For travel destination activities, refer to travel guides written specifically for children's interests.
- When possible, pre-purchase tickets to vacation events to avoid long waits in ticket lines. Be sure to take your payment receipts when traveling.

Prepare Children for Travel Experience

- No matter how well prepared a child is for travel, they will throw you for a curve. After all, children see and hear terrifying things about all kinds of travel in movies and on the news. If children share a fear, 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 our plane crew has done everything they can to make our flight safe." Your rule of thumb: *listen, accept, empathize, and reassure.*
- Before your child travels in a new way, do a "warm up" visit to the departure site prior to travel. This may involve visiting the train or bus station, or even a boat dock or airport to see how travelers make their way around.
- Describe what your travel mode will feel like. Trains, planes, buses, and boats really do have different sounds and sensations than riding in a car. Forewarned kids don't scare as easily.
- Explain how long travel will take according to children's ability to understand. For kids who can't tell time yet, you could say, "We'll be on the plane as long as it takes to watch one cartoon video."
- With younger children, use toys such as puppets, dolls, or travel play stations to "act out" the upcoming experience. When play acting, use some phrases children are likely to hear: "Flight attendants, prepare for landing," or "We're now departing the docks."
- If you will use a hotel, try to book a room on the first floor for quickest fire or emergency evacuation. Check out the Internet for reviews of family-friendly hotels.

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Child-friendly Traveling

When possible, travel during children's nap or nighttime sleep schedule.

- Plan travel to avoid rush hour traffic when possible.
- Schedule "rest-stop" times for travel. When driving, stop every two hours or so; more frequently if pets and young preschool children are along.

Explain how long travel will take according to children's ability to understand.

- If traveling by plane, direct flights under two hours are best. However, don't avoid layovers on very long trips. A two-hour layover lets kids run around a bit, toilet, or eat in a food court. One hour layovers are just too rushed.
- Carry infants in a back-pack carrier; it will leave your hands free.
- Preschoolers and older children can help carry some of their "travel" games and items in their own backpack or child-sized wheeled suitcase.
- Have juice and snack items on hand during travel; it will help calm kids.
- Provide play items for children within easy reach, such as favorite books or books on tape, doll, markers and paper, lap toy such as a magnetic puzzle).
- Play travel games. At your library or bookstore, locate books filled with travel games and activities. Search out web sites, too.

Plan for Probable Challenges

Wet wipes help with sanitation when water isn't nearby. For scratches or scrapes, have a small first aid kit handy. When flying, pacifiers help infants cope with air pressure changes. Avoid starting a child's potty training close to a holiday vacation. If your child is partially trained, or just recently achieved toilet mastery, it's better to be safe than sorry. Have your child wear pull-up type diapers for travel time so he/she doesn't soil clothing and seats. In case of a preschooler's unpredictable toileting or vomiting accident, have a spare set of clothes easily accessible.

And last but not least, have a great, safe time traveling together!

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*.