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Traveling With Kids: Tips for Keeping Children Happy While Traveling

Whether you're dealing with motion sickness, nap schedule changes, or iPhone addiction, there are strategies for every situation.

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As a travel writer, I take dozens of trips every year. However, as mom to two high-energy boys (ages five and seven), travel with the kids can sometimes be painful. When my kids were younger, I brought stickers, coloring books, snacks—all the tricks—and yet a two-hour flight to Chicago would often end up with all of us in tears (and the folks around us were none too happy, either). Turns out I'm not alone. There are a lot of kids that just aren't great travelers.

“Some kids may feel anxious about leaving their familiar comfortable surroundings,” says Nicole Beurkens, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist at [Horizons Developmental Resource Center](#) in Caledonia, MI. “Others, particularly teens, may prefer to stay near their friends and partake in their typical activities as opposed to spending time exclusively with family members.”

Here, the most common reasons kids may not love traveling—and how to get around them.

When Your Kid Doesn't Like to Fly

Many people have a fear of flying, and that includes children. “Kids who tend toward anxiety about life in general may be more prone to specific fears, such as flying,” says Dr. Beurken. But even kids who are adventurous and ready for any challenge may fall apart when boarding a plane. What to do? “Exposure strategies can be helpful to ease anxiety in preparation for flying,” says Dr. Beurkens. For example, younger children can look at and read simple picture books showing the parts of a plane and parents can walk kids through the process of taking a flight. Then, on the day of the flight, get to the airport early and make it a fun adventure. Sit by a large glass window and watch the planes take off and land. Pack snacks that can only be eaten on the plane. Of course anyone with little kids knows the power of distractions. One good idea? Lots of “presents” from the dollar store. Each individually wrapped toy or book can keep kids occupied long enough to stave off an imminent meltdown. And remember, kids learn by example. So even if flying stresses you out or your kids are being a handful, try and remain calm. “When children see that parents are comfortable and relaxed it helps them feel more secure and reduces their anxiety,” notes Dr. Beurkens.

What not to do? Don't shame your child for their fear of flying or make statements like “there's nothing to worry about.” This can backfire and make your child more stressed. Instead, acknowledge how your child feels and then highlight the strategies you and they will use to help them through. “Remember, all of us are scared and insecure when we approach something unfamiliar,” says [Jennifer Freed](#), Ph.D., a family behavioral specialist in Santa Barbara, California. With time and many flights under their belt, my kids soon became seasoned flyers (it didn't hurt that the only time they ever get to drink ginger ale is on the plane).



How to Help Your Kids Sleep on Planes

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When Your Kid Doesn't Want to Be Without Her iPhone

Realistically, parents should have clear boundaries concerning electronics to help kids avoid addictive behavior. “However, vacations can provide an excellent time for implementing new rules and boundaries if they have not been in place previously,” says Dr. Beurkens. One option is to have your kids leave their phones in the hotel while you’re out as a family doing activities. That way, there are no arguments throughout the day about checking the phone. Or, put everyone’s phones in a parent’s bag until specified times—for example, everyone gets 30 minutes to catch up on e-mails and social media after lunch. “One important thing to note here is that parents need to be prepared to put their devices down and fully engage in the vacation experiences as well,” says Dr. Beurkens. “Parents need to model appropriate use of electronics for their children.” So if you’re not willing to put the phone down, you can’t expect your kids to.

When your Kid Gets Motion Sickness

Motion sickness is a real issue for some children, and can create challenges for travel. “There are a variety of things that can cause motion sickness, but the overarching issue is a disconnect between

fluid in the inner ear canals and the information coming in through the eyes,” says Dr. Beurkens. “The brain gets confused and disoriented, which creates a sensation of dizziness and nausea.” Experts suggest these remedies: having kids look out the window (not reading or playing with the iPad), facing forward (never backwards) in the car or on the train, sipping water, chewing gum, sucking on peppermint or ginger candy, and using devices such as Sea Bands. If you’ve tried all of that and your kids are still sick, check with your doctor about prescription meds.

When Your Kid Can't Sleep Anywhere But Her Own Bed

Kids crave consistency (that’s why they like to watch the same movie and read the same book over and over). To make your hotel or cabin feel more like home, have your child pack their favorite pillowcase, stuffed animal, or blankie. A loved item from home can ease the transition. Also, remember that kids are really sensitive to parents’ anxiety so parents need to put their own issues aside and show enthusiasm for the new room (even if you don’t love it, take one for the team).

Sleep schedules and nap times can also go off course on vacation. If your child takes a nap every day and you don’t want to sit in the hotel room while that happens, then be creative. “Many cities offer bus tours that give parents an opportunity to take in the sites, while children may end up using that time for a short nap,” says Allison Buskirk-Cohen, Ph.D., Chair and associate professor at Delaware Valley University in Doylestown, PA. “Parents should try to keep a holistic view of what’s most important—everyone enjoying the trip and creating great memories”—Even if that means missing a nap or staying up late once in a while.

When Your Kid Fights with His Sibling

One reason siblings fight more often on trips is simply because of the time spent together in limited space. Many kids today are used to having some private space, whether it be their own bedrooms or separate play areas. Sitting next to each other for a long car ride or sharing a hotel room can be challenging. “To help children get along well, parents should incorporate breaks for the family—time when everyone gets some space to themselves to relax,” says Dr. Buskirk-Cohen. “Parents also may want to schedule different activities for different children.” The type of activity that appeals to a first-grader may be quite different from what appeals to a fourth-grader. Often my husband and I will split up for a few hours on a trip and cater the activity to each child. That way, each of us gets special time with our respective son and the kids get to do exactly what they want. Then when we come back together as a family, the sibling rivalry doesn’t seem to be as intense.

