

Traveling With Children: Planes, Trains, and “Are We There Yet?”

from a parent’s perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

I’m taking my daughter, who is 3½, from Los Angeles to Boston to visit my parents. We will be in the air six hours then three-and-a-half, with a four-hour stop over between flights. Any travel tips?

This summer we are driving from Tucson to Sacramento to see my brother. We’ll be in the car for a day and a half each way. How can I keep my three and five year olds from debating over which square-inch of the seat belongs to one or the other for several hundred miles?

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What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation.

Each issue, we will address your real-life issues.

To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column.

Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

– Solution –

Three Big Words

Before any family travel, chant these three words daily:

Prevention! Prevention! Prevention!

The best way to prevent displaying one’s parenting skills while wrestling a child into an aircraft seatbelt, chasing offspring across runways, or pounding on the bathroom door insisting that the child inside “Open up,” to let her sister use the toilet “NOW!” is to never get into these situations.

The Rules

What behavior is expected? This requires planning. Will seatbelts be needed? When? Explain about seatbelt lights and the rules of air travel.

Can car seats be unbuckled to lay down for a nap? Why not? What will make sleeping in a car easier? Small pillows? Lap blankets? A seat to oneself? If a seat alone is impossible, what are the rules for the non-sleeper? No poking, quiet voice, staying on his side of the seat?

What about the rules in stores or at rest stops? Is holding a parent’s hand necessary? One mom told about stopping to buy a book for her child at an airport kiosk. While she was paying, her son decided to look in a store a few shops away. The airport police, complete with search dogs, got involved before mom and child were reunited. A good rule: NEVER leave an area without a parent.

Spell out needed rules — before they are needed.

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In another airport restroom, I overheard a little girl tell her sister that she had to wait in the same stall with her until she finished — “so the bad mommies don’t get you.” This child had been given safety guidelines and was following them.

When children are given clear expectations, they make smarter and safer choices.

Sleeping and soothers

Another key to prevention is that of thinking through the basics: sleeping, eating, and toileting. No matter what the time zones — children function according to their own inner time clocks.

Bring blankies, teddy bears, or other sleep soothers but DO NOT bring your one and only MOST precious ones. An irreplaceable teddy left in the ladies room of Chicago’s O’Hare Airport is just that — irreplaceable. Agree upon lesser-valued items for travel purposes, or even better prevention: have duplicates. Consider excising a small square of a favorite quilt (one probably in tatters by now anyway) to take with you, tucking the rest around the half-bald stuffed poodle left behind.

Label anything you do bring so that it can find its way back again — but only with address or contact numbers, no names. (When an adult calls a child by name the child can be confused, thinking this might be a safe person.) Ditto the reason for not displaying names on visible nametags.

Pin or tie treasured items to coat sleeves or back packs. I still remember the ride home when we did not discover that Teddy had headed one direction on the ferry across Puget Sound while we had headed the other. That was a *l-o-n-g* car ride.

Food and eating

Pack simple, non-messy snacks. Roasted almonds, granola bars, and boxes of apple

juice are good; sticky fruit leather, purple grape juice, or salty peanuts and meltable chocolates are not. Bring portable wipes (moistened paper towels in a plastic bag work fine).

On the other hand, an entire Piggly-Wiggly does not contain enough snacks for a multi-day train trip. Those energy-gobbling, time-consuming walks to the diner and back are worth every dollar.

Use meals as breaks. Begin driving at 3 AM with everyone still in pajamas and asleep (except, of course, the driver). The first stop of the day can be a mid-morning breakfast/brunch. Children dress in pre-selected outfits while crouched in the backseat or hopping from foot to foot in a restroom stall (with an adult present).

Tip: Always keep changes of clothes in carry-ons — or within reach.

Toileting

Never overlook a toileting opportunity. Trot to restrooms before getting into a car, bus, train, or plane. Get everyone to at least try. Enough said.

Entertainment

What to do — in the airport, in the car, onboard a train or bus? Prevention, remember? Pack a travel bag — one per child. A mix of old (familiar or favorites) and new (special and surprises) is best.

Purchase small child-size backpacks (wheeled ones for longer trips) so each child may carry his own (at least at first). In the car, a double grocery bag or empty box stationed by each seat keeps crayons, books, and papers at hand.

Hand out new items at intervals: after every hour of peaceful travel; when a meal was eaten without mayhem; at the beginning of each new segment of a trip. In desperate situations, dole out single

crayons to celebrate every 10 - 15 minutes of peace (I considered four children in the same car a *desperate situation*).

Magnetic board games (fewer missing pieces); reusable stickers — especially those with backgrounds (houses, forests, or farmyards) to rearrange and make up stories; and origami paper (be sure to learn how to fold a drinking cup before the trip) are great choices.

A clipboard substitutes as a portable desk, while drawing pads are preferable to loose sheets. Washable markers and crayons (avoid pointed pens and pencils); erasable slates; *magic* pictures that appear when being rubbed or dot-to-dot art and mazes all keep minds whirring — instead of fingers poking, feet probing, or voices whining.

All noisemaking devices need to have earphones (be sure that volumes are kept at safe levels). A handheld CD player, DVDs, or story books with follow-along texts will help the miles and hours fly by, but do consider banning these for at least part of each trip, to enjoy the experience of the journey.

People games

Play together. Variations of *I Spy* can focus attention on what is outside the window: who can spot a black cow; find a house with a smoking chimney; or call out first sightings of South Dakota license plates or chrome hood ornaments.

Twenty-questions can go on for miles: “Is it an animal?” “Did this person live in America?” “Can the item fit in a toaster?”

Create a family quest. One family chose a theme of *pies* and asked those who they met about their favorite pies; gathered secret, family recipes; and ordered pie at every new restaurant, enjoying food for both mind and body.

Song

Don't forget family sing-a-longs. For the musically challenged, a tape can carry the tunes while everyone else belts out whatever notes they please.

Jingle Bells in July is fine — if those are the only words everyone knows. We have crooned *Home on the Range* to fields of Canadian sheep, sung *This Land is My Land* to crowded interstate commuters, and warbled about *little puffer bellies all in a row* to the bafflement of sunbathing chipmunks and stream-dwelling frogs.

Getting There

Remember that *getting there* is vacation time, too. The patchwork pattern of fields seen through a plane's window, the change from a city's hot asphalt to cool mountain air, the spicy scent of pines inhaled through open car windows, or the brown squiggle of a river spied beneath a 200 foot high train trestle, all transform travel. Provide each child with an inexpensive camera to record her version of the trip.

On an all-day drive, check into a motel with a pool to cool down with a family swim. Buy bread, cheese, and apples then explore a local park over lunch; collect postcards, sand samples, or sugar packets; give in to fruit stands and eat oranges, peaches, or cherries next to the trees where they ripened. One family read *Miss Rumphius* beforehand, and scattered their own lupine seeds throughout several states.

Stay flexible. Viewing a buffalo herd up close, lured by a sign en route, was at least as memorable as our planned visit to Glacier Park.

Let *there be here*, and you will enjoy *getting there* as much as *being there*.