

Tips for Traveling with Young Children

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Long Before Traveling – Cultivate Flexibility

Young children thrive on predictable routines. However, **build some flexibility into routines**. For example, for bedtime, sometimes switch up which stuffed animals are nearby, or whether the music is playing or not, or tell an oral story instead of reading, or settle them for sleep in a different location than usual, so they know these things can change but they still feel safe and comforted.

Practice skills at home that your child may someday need on a trip. Take rides on your local bus or trains. Go to the mall to learn to ride an escalator. Eat at restaurants. Use porta-potties. Go places where they have to wait in line with you. Try a small local water slide before the huge water park. Before going camping, first use the sleeping bag in the house. Then try a tent in the backyard. Don't try all these things for the first time while you're on a big trip you invested a lot of money into!

Planning the Trip

If you **first think about making sure your child's bodily needs are met**, then it's easier to plan in fun activities and have them be successful. So, think about your child's napping needs. Think about how much stimulation they can take in before they melt down. Think about food and mealtime needs. Attention spans. Can you build a travel plan that works around your child's natural rhythms?

When choosing lodging, having a kitchenette may give you more flexibility for meals; having a washer/dryer can be helpful; having a hotel "suite" with a living room may make evenings more manageable as you can put little ones down to sleep in one room while adults relax in another room. Having a place with a pool or an outdoor play area can help them get some energy out.

Many parents **travel to the same place over and over** so they know how everything works. You can **choose cheap vacation destinations** for young kids. Anywhere with a playground, water to wade in and throw rocks in, trees to climb, and quiet places to snuggle up and read or do art will be perfect. Save expensive destinations for when they're older and will appreciate them. **Consider traveling with family members**. It's more fun, and there's an extra hands to help out!

Prepare Your Child

Tell your child what to expect and what's expected of them. It's easier for them to behave well if they know what that means in this new context. Talk about your plans, show them pictures, or use books or videos to prepare them. Be explicit about how they should behave.

Packing for the Trip

Before you start thinking about what to bring, first ask yourself: **Realistically, how much can you carry while tending to children?** Strategize ahead of time how you'll carry things: backpacks leave your hands free; carseats are hard to carry, so plan for that. For **bigger equipment**, like carseats, strollers, and cribs / pack-n-plays, can you borrow or rent one at your destination?

When I'm packing, my approach is to **pack the minimum** I think I'll need. If there's something I'm debating about bringing "just in case", then I think – how likely is it I'll actually need it? If I don't have it, how bad will it be? Some things I've decided: if I end up needing this, I can always buy it there. That's saved me carrying lots of extra items, and I've virtually never ended up buying anything.

Involve children in choosing a few comfort items to bring along (like a small stuffed animal), but also make sure they know that we won't have as many toys there as we do at home, and that's OK.

Food: If you have a flexible eater, you may not need to plan ahead. If you have a picky eater, pack a stash of snacks you know for sure they will eat. You can save money by fixing your own food at your lodgings rather than going out. If you don't want to spend a lot of time planning / packing food, or cooking and cleaning, plan to do a grocery trip at your destination and choose easy, low prep foods.

Packing the Carry On Bag

Whether we're traveling by plane, train, or automobile, we always have a "carry-on" with items that need to be easy to access. I'll sometimes even pack one for going to a restaurant or anywhere my child may be expected to stay in one place and quietly play. Suggested items to include:

- pacifiers or teething toys – have extra in case one gets lost or dirty
- wipes and diapers – more than you expect to need; napkins or wet wipes for clean-ups
- extra clothes for the child, and maybe for the parent
- phone or tablet loaded with interesting content (make sure it's charged!!) plus headphones
- snacks – non-messy ones! And a sippy cup for water.
- for plane rides: pressure changes during takeoff and landing can hurt a child's ears. For a baby, nurse or offer a pacifier. For an older child, offer gum, hard candy, or the sippy cup.
- toys / activities to keep them entertained (see below)

Keeping Them Entertained

Some options that work well when you just need your child to sit still, and play quietly:

- Miscellaneous small toys – the cheap toys you get at a dollar store or as party favors, so if you lose some, no one will be heartbroken. Dole them out a few at a time over the trip.
- Screens. Tablet or phone with books, movies, or apps loaded and ready to go.
- Magazines, puzzle books, activity books. (When you finish one, you can recycle it.)
- Art / drawing: Paper and markers, or a magna-doodle. Paint with water books. Wikki Stix.
- Painter's tape, post-it notes, or window clings are so fun to stick down, pull up again, stick down again, and so on. Just remove them when you're done.
- For road trips: audiobooks, podcasts, and sing-alongs.
- Games to play – I Spy, 20 questions, would you rather, tic-tac-toe and so on.
- Avoid bringing anything that is irreplaceable, messy, or loud.

Travel Day

Anything you can do ahead of time, do! Check in online, print baggage tags, buy attraction tickets, get your maps / directions ready. The less you have to juggle while juggling kids, the better.

Dress everyone in comfy clothes, with layers to adjust for too much heat or too much air conditioning, and shoes that are easy to get on and off. **Allow LOTS of extra time.** More than you think you'll need! The calmer you stay, the calmer your kid will be.

Be flexible, be nice to people, have fun... model for your child all the best traveler behavior you can think of! My partner calls this Vacation Mode – if you're actively relaxed and having a good time, it helps those around you do the same.