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[Home](#) > Into the Blue: Travel Tips for Flying with Your Children

Into the Blue: Travel Tips for Flying with Your Children

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For many of us, our dearest are not nearest, and this can feel especially poignant when you are a parent. My son is now two-and-a-half, and he and I have made sixteen excursions by plane to see family. I do not wish so much air travel on anyone. It's hard on the body (especially a little body), expensive, and contributes measurably to changes in the climate. And then there are safety considerations. But I have plenty of suggestions to make those one or two trips a year manageable, safe, and even fun.

Ready, Get Set...

The ideal planning time is four to six months to compare airline fares, acquaint your child with the concept of flying, and file for a birth certificate and/or passport.

Concerned about radiation exposure? Fly at lower latitudes and altitudes. According to Diana Fairechild, author of *Jet Smart* and a flight attendant for more than 20 years, "Flights over the polar regions sustain double the radiation as flights over the equator, and radiation doubles every 6,500 feet." On her website (flyana.com), she writes, "Specifically, the jets which fly at higher altitudes are the ones usually found on the long-range routes. A one-way New York to London flight exposes passengers to about the same amount of radiation as a chest X-ray!"

Fly on less-full flights. Departures during the week, in the middle of the day, or with a return on a Saturday can also be less expensive. And if there are delays, you'll be more likely to catch the next flight out. If flying during the busier holidays is unavoidable, add a few extra days on either side of the intensity.

Consider connections. Connecting once or twice could make your flight cheaper and the layover could help distract or engage an unhappy child. The drawback is that most complications occur during "takeoff, climb, descent, and landing," according to airsafe.com.

Visit seatguru.com for most airlines' seating plans and services. Consider the bulkhead rows, where there is extra legroom. The drawback is that you have to store your carry-ons overhead, which may be impractical. Try for seats toward the front of the plane where turbulence is reportedly felt less acutely, and for faster on and off. Avoid exit rows, and in some planes, in the rows ahead and behind.

Weigh the cost of buying your under-two-year-old a seat. It is well-known that children under two may travel for free on the lap of an individual 18 or older, but the practice is controversial because of the safety issues. Turbulence cannot always be anticipated and is not always insignificant.

Though my little guy traveled on my lap until he was two-years-old without incident, there is a safer way.

That safer way is in a Child Restraint System (CRS), which can be your car seat. To guarantee a spot, you'll likely need to buy a ticket—it's pretty rare to happen upon an open seat. Ask your airline about their policy on discounted tickets.

For a child more than one-year-old and between 22 and 44 pounds occupying his/her own seat, most airlines quietly recommend the FAA-approved Child Aviation Restraint System (CARES), which is a harness weighing less than a pound that attaches to the airplane seat belt. It makes the adult-sized seats better accommodate a pint-sized person. For more information, visit http://www.faa.gov/passengers/fly_children/crs/ ^[1]

Confirm a window seat. If you are traveling alone with one lap child, a window seat is the most private and roomy place, and a requirement if you want your child in a CRS. Before I had my son, window seats made me claustrophobic—now they feel like a refuge.

Don't special-order the special meal. If the airline offers meals, and you feel you must have one, you still ought to resist. Even the special meals are loaded with preservatives.

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Your CRS or theirs? The airline will let you check your CRS as baggage, and they may even provide you with a large, clear plastic bag to keep it clean and intact (I always bring my own huge duffle bag). If you will be renting a car, you can typically rent a CRS from the same agency, if you book in advance. With Avis, the seat was decent, but more important, it existed. Rental agencies recommend that you confirm a few days prior to ensure that there is an actual CRS attached to your reservation.

Consider travel insurance. It will cost only a small fraction of your outlay and you're covered if your family gets sick before your trip. Begin your research at www.insuremytrip.com [2].

Introduce the trip a few weeks prior. Take your children to the airport, show them an airplane and a map. Find one of the myriad story books that offers a compelling narrative of a child taking a trip by plane. Regardless of what you imagine your child's comprehension to be, explain the imminent, new experience repeatedly.

Bring proper identification. Make a copy of your child's birth certificate or passport for check-in. I had a ticket agent challenge me when I told her that my non-walking, not-yet-eating-solids son was under two. If you've purchased a seat for your child, the airline needs original ID.

Find the best carry-on. On a recent trip, I found the please-all solution—my daypack. Its zippered compartments were good for organization and toddler fascination. In general, the bag ought to close easily and securely, offer space for extra wipes, diapers, clothing, and earplugs or cotton balls, and not be prone to tip or collapse.

In addition to the obvious, I include the following for my son: something small that makes a small noise, namely a few beaded bracelets; something special, namely stickers featuring all matter of balls; and something secure and life-like, namely a brown bear, good for cuddles and chatter.

If your children are older, fill their personal backpack with essentials, but do not leave it under the seat when you get off the plane. I'm still explaining the loss of one dear cuddly lion.

Does your destination have all of the comforts of home? Check out this website that organizes baby equipment rental companies by states in the US: www.baby-equipment-rental.com/crib_rentals.htm [3].

BYOFAW. To remain healthy, hydrated, and happy, avoid all refreshments offered on-board, especially the ice, coffee, and tea, likely not made from purified or spring water. Bring your own fresh food and your own vessel for water. Avoid salt and heavy sugars. Consider that you are traveling at altitude and that your digestion might be impaired. Fairechild writes, "Flying is an arduous condition on the body because the high-altitude environment affects oxygen assimilation and all metabolic functions."

If you forget to bring food, buy fruit and yogurt near your gate. If you want non-tap or non-fountain water, you'll have to purchase bottles at the gate as you are not allowed to bring your own through Security. You can, however, bring liquid for your child.

To avoid a search or any delay at Security, I put all of our ingestibles and salves in a clear plastic bag and run it through the X-ray in its own tray, so that Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) can see exactly what I am toting. In addition to the obvious, I recommend packing nasal spray or vegetable oil to keep your nasal passages moist. Here's TSA's website for the latest regulations: www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/children/index.shtm [4]

Be realistic about your baby-carrying or toddler-toting device. I always bring my son's stroller, which I can check at the airplane door before I board. It's always waiting for me when I get off the flight and sometimes it's even open and facing the right direction. Consider that you might need to move very, very fast. Whatever you choose, consider that the device should be a safe haven from the madness of an airport and useful at your destination.

Hydrate ahead. Beginning several days before your trip, drink more H₂O than you typically would. Flying dehydrates the body, which can make any jet lag worse and any mood foul. Fairechild writes: "In-flight cabin humidities gradually fall on long-distance, high-altitude flights in many cases approaching 1 percent." Just imagine these conditions on a small body!

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I prepare weak, warm chamomile tea for my son to drink as we drive to the airport. I tell myself this calms him, and Colleen K. Dodt, author of *Natural Baby Care*, validates me: "To calm a fussy baby, try combining rosewater with a few drops of Bach Rescue Remedy on a cotton pad and wiping the child's body. Lavender or chamomile waters are also very calming. Lavender is particularly reviving and soothing during travel."

Go! Into the Blue Yonder

Let's hope you have booked a midday flight so you can maintain your morning routine. Eat something hearty, but easily digestible. Fairechild writes: "Here's the advice from mountain climbers: carbohydrates offer an 'altitude advantage' that helps them to stay healthier at high altitudes."

Dress yourselves in loose, layered clothing without buttons and snaps. Wear socks and slip-off shoes for an easier trip through Security and a more comfy flight. I also always pack hats for the chill, and because they shield the light.

You might want a little extra time, but I emphasize little. Consider that airports are crowded, noisy, and filthy—and weigh that against the time it takes to go through Security. I am always pleasantly surprised by a short queue, but the act of stripping down to go through the X-rays and buttoning up in a matter of pressurized seconds is always intense. Strollers and CRSs need to be flattened and X-rayed. That clear plastic bag needs a separate tray, as do your shoes and your children's. The biggest challenge could be getting your children to part with their security animals long enough to send them through the X-ray.

I leave an hour and still have many minutes to spare. If you have extra time or a long layover, find out whether the airports in your itinerary have play structures. My son adored one of these gyms in Atlanta. He talked about his new friends later that day and slept well on our flight home. This website offers links to airport websites worldwide: www.airlineandairportlinks.com ^[5].

If you need an extra seat, ask the agent. Find out the likelihood of the seat remaining open. Do not check your CRS at the ticket counter if there's a possibility. You can always check it at the gate.

Survey your gate for other parents and children. My son likes knowing there's a little friend on-board. If you establish a casual relationship, it might be easier to re-meet the family in the air.

If you have a stroller, get it tagged for checking. I keep the carbon copy of the tag in my pocket until I retrieve our stroller.

All Aboard

As the gate agent begins the boarding process, my son and I are still playing within earshot. Or we are walking swiftly to the bathroom to check his diaper. Do not succumb to the hype of pre-boarding. Perhaps this is my quirk, but I do not want any 'extra time' for my son to be cooped up, breathing plane air.

Endear the flight attendants to your family. Everyone loves a cute baby, but no one likes to hear babies cry on airplanes. If the flight attendants get the feeling you are doing your best and are aware of everyone else's experience, they'll be much more receptive to your needs.

Belt your child into the seat while you organize. Everything is within reach at my feet or in my seat pocket.

Clean the hard surfaces around your seat. While this will not save you from getting sick, it may reduce your exposure to germs. Or it might just make you feel better.

Amusing Antics in the Air

Engaging your child in the air is not too different from doing so on the ground. It's just that you are limited to your seats, for the most part. On your side could be the newness of the experience.

Draw pictures for a particularly nice flight attendant, your hosts, or of the people you've left behind.

Let your child play with things on the plane: The tray table (supervised locking and unlocking), the window shade (supervised up and down), and the magazines (supervised flipping to find things they can name).

If passengers want to be nice and play peek-a-boo, let them. Consider if it's a crowd-pleaser.

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Get up and move around when you confirm the probability of turbulence. Wash your hands often. Locate that parent and child you met at the gate. Identify people who are wearing objects your child can name and tally them. For my son, it's glasses, bracelets, and hats.

Identify and name the plane's features. This can be a good word-gathering opportunity. My son learned 'window' and 'cloud' while flying.

If the clouds are big and puffy, they may be perfect for shape identification.

Make a tent. Hang the plane's blanket (I recommend bringing your own) off the back of the seat in front and your child's seat, so your child can sleep or just feel cozy. Pillows help here, but you might want to bring your own case.

If you must change a diaper, do it on the seat. The lavatory is far from your seat belt, does not always offer a changing platform, and is dirty and uncomfortable.

Passengers prefer to hear discipline than to be kicked from behind. I always try to make friends with the passengers around us in order to put a nice I-promise-to-do-the-very-best-I-can face on our family. I even try to trade names. It's hard to be mad at someone you've just met. But if the kicking or screaming starts or you sense its inception, get up and move around (turbulence-dependent). If your children are old enough, try to make them understand why it's unpleasant for {insert passenger name}. If you are sitting at a window, remove your children's shoes and let them push their feet against the window, the seat arm, or wall.

If you must consume something from the cart, make it bottled water (ask for it every hour) and the least salty/sweet thing available. Your will power will help you recover faster from flying because your body will not have to process the preservatives and other additives.

Play "What's missing?" I draw a picture of something my son's familiar with—our house, my face, his grandfather's dog—but leave off one very significant element: a door, a mouth, a tail. He has to identify what's missing. With an older child, the number of objects increases, and they can draw.

Compose a story sentence by sentence. You can spin a great tale if you trade responsibility for sentence creation. This makes a fun gift for your host.

As the airplane descends to land, the air pressure inside the cabin and your child's ear increases. This can be painful. Only an older child will know how to yawn and pop the pressure. For a baby or toddler, the pressure can be alleviated by sucking on something—a breast, a finger, or a straw.

On Vacation Land

You're excited to see your hosts, but a little weary. When my son and I travel to the east coast from the Rockies, his sleeping patterns remain tied to Mountain Time initially, and then slowly shift. I'm the one who stays up too late and gets up too early to maximize time with my family.

Rehydrate. If you are nursing a lot, you may need more fluid than you think. According to Fairechild, symptoms of dehydration include "gthirst, scratchy eyes, bloodshot eyes, dry skin, wrinkled skin, backed-up plumbing, and more." Some, including Fairechild, recommend a gallon of water a day for up to three days following your flight. My son will not consume water in these quantities, so I allow him to drink whatever hydrates him, namely diluted juice.

If your hosts adore your children and the feeling is mutual, take a break. It's gratifying to watch your children enjoy family and friends, especially if seeing one another is rare.

Resist cramming in tons of activities. While going out to dinner, to a museum, or on a boat ride all seem irresistible, moments of transition can be stressful. My son and I have found that a morning in my mother's living room with the cats, blocks, and the wooden slide is totally satisfying.

Don't let your hosts send you home with more stuff. Your luggage is already stuffed to the point of near-surrender, and you mustn't look to your carry-on bag for support, which should be packed with practical items only!

Confirm your flights 24, 8, and 3 hours in advance and pack healthy snacks.

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Move scattered items to a central place in proximity to the front door. It's easy to forget even the most

essential items when you are not operating from your own home.

Coming Home

Consider some of the same things you thought about on the way out, including sleep, germs, and water.

It might just be a sniffle, but can still be disruptive. Your child's sleep schedule could also be thrown—clear your calendar for a faster recovery.

The day after is always spent at home. My son sleeps and gets reacquainted with his toys. I unpack, catch up with the life we left behind, nap, and force myself and my son to drink water. If we stick to this regimen, we can jump back into our routine the next day.

Returning is always a little sad. To make us all feel better, my family and I have agreed to plan our next visit before the current one ends.

My family and I talk of living in the same city one day, where a morning walk could easily put us on one another's front porch. Until then, we'll likely fly several times a year and get better at it as we go. Bon voyage!

Toddler



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Source URL: <http://mothering.com/parenting/travel-tips-for-flying-with-your-children>

Links:

- [1] http://www.faa.gov/passengers/fly_children/crs/
- [2] <http://www.insuremytrip.com/>
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