

How to Travel With Children

By Shivani Vora (The New York Times, March 1, 2018)

Travel can be an enlightening and eye-opening experience for children of all ages: there's new foods, experiences and sights, not to mention quality family time. But traveling with children can also be an overwhelming proposition — unpredictable schedules, long packing lists and cranky kids are just a few of the challenges you may encounter along the way. But here we'll help you make traveling with kids a breeze. After all, you and your children should enjoy every moment seeing the world and create a lifetime of memories along the way. Isn't that the point of travel in the first place?

Keeping Kids Engaged, at Any Age

You're looking forward to that upcoming family vacation, but you want to make sure younger family members will have fun, too.

The specific strategies you can use to help children have a good time on the road depends on how old they are: A baby has very different needs than a toddler or tween. But however old your child is, be sure to do some pre-trip research on kid-friendly activities in your destination that you and your family can take advantage of. A little preparation will go a long way.

Infants

Children in the newborn to age 2 range are the easiest to travel with in many respects, according to Rainer Jenss, the president and founder of the Family Travel Association, a trade group for family travel. "Kids this age are portable," he said. "You can take them anywhere and keep them happy as long as you create a comfortable environment for them and keep them on their routine."

Amanda Norcross, the features editor of the online travel magazine Family Vacation Critic, agrees that schedules are incredibly important for infants. "If your infant is on an eating or sleep schedule, try to stay as close to that as possible on vacation and plan your days accordingly," she said.

Be sure to bring along your infant's favorite toys, books and bottles while on your adventures, and don't keep him or her strapped in a baby carrier or stroller all day — give your baby the opportunity to walk and get some exercise; if your infant isn't walking yet, he or she can still stretch on a mat or roll around.

Toddlers

Toddlers are a fun age because they'll start to engage in the different sights around them, Ms. Norcross said. "Destinations get to be enjoyable for them to explore," she said. But when building your itinerary, be sure to leave plenty of down time to let them release and refuel their energy by hitting a playground or your hotel's pool.

Mr. Jenss is also a fan for spending time in local parks with toddlers. "The more open space your toddler has to run around, the happier he or she will be," he said. As a bonus, you're likely to

meet local parents who can advise you on other activities for your toddler in town and also tell you names of kid-friendly restaurants to dine at.

School-Age Children

The key to keeping kids 5 and older engaged on a family trip is to get them involved in the planning, even in a small way, Mr. Jenss said. “The more you empower kids this age to pick what they’re interested in doing, whether it’s seeing a cool site or trying surfing, the more engaged they will be,” he said.

Tip: Let your children choose between several activities instead of giving them no direction whatsoever. In a beach destination, for example, the options might be a half-day snorkeling trip or a fishing excursion. In an urban setting, share choices of interesting walking tours, and let them pick the one or two which appeal to them the most.

Eric Stoen, the founder of the online family travel site Travel Babbo, said that choosing the right guides goes a long way in keeping your kids excited about where they are. When you’re researching tours and activities, he said, read online reviews to learn about which guides have engaged well with kids in the past. A great guide can have a profound effect on your children: Mr. Stoen’s son, for example, has become an excellent sketcher because of an artist in London who led the family on an art tour around the city. “It’s a tour that literally changed his life,” he said.

Teenagers

Ms. Norcross said that the best way to keep teenagers engaged is to have them take ownership in planning a part of your trip. She suggests having them choose some attractions which they are interested in seeing and even letting them design one of two days of your itinerary.

Also, Mr. Jenss, a father of two teenagers, said that parents may want to consider giving older teens the option to spend an hour or two exploring the destination on their own —maybe they want to check out a certain neighborhood or go to specific stores. “As long you and your teen both feel safe, he or she is going to be super excited about having some time alone,” he said.

Picking a Destination

With the world as your proverbial oyster, it may be hard to narrow down a destination for a family trip. How do you choose?

Interests First, Destination Second

Don’t choose a destination, choose what you want to do, Mr. Jenss said. Do you want to relax on the beach? Do you want an adventure packed nature getaway? Are you seeking an urban escape? “Once you decide how you want to spend your time off, you can decide where to go,” he said.

Some ways to think about your destination:

Beach vacations work with children of any age.

Theme parks are best when kids are between the ages of 3 and 12 — children younger than 3 won't be able to go on most of the rides, and older kids aren't always interested in theme parks. Cruises are a good bet for school-age and teenage children because they can be fairly independent and keep busy with a range of activities.

“All family-friendly cruise lines have kids and teens clubs,” Mr. Jenss said.

Also, be open to visiting international destinations, and if you have school-age or teenage children, ask them where they want to go — involving them in the decision process will make the trip that much more memorable for them. It's a strategy that works well for Mr. Stoen's family. “I let each of my three children pick a destination for one of the three trips we take a year,” he said. He has traveled to 48 countries with his children including Japan, Australia, Belize and the Maldives, as well as Antarctica.

Getting a Passport

All children need passports when traveling internationally, even infants. On its site, United States Department of State details the steps you need to take to apply for a passport for your child. New applications or renewals for children under the age of 16 must be done in person, either at a post office or at a passport acceptance facility. Both parents or guardians must be either be present in person or provide a notarized letter to the parent who is. (You can find the passport acceptance facility closest to you on the State Department's site.)

While you are getting a passport for any family members who don't have one, be sure to check the expiration dates of those you do have. Some countries have rules about how long your passport must be valid for after your trip.

For the latest information available about the country you're headed to, including what vaccinations you may need, if a visa is required to travel there, and how long your passport needs to be valid for, check the site for the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Planning an Itinerary and Choosing Accommodations

This could be the best part of your trip: studies have shown that planning your vacation can give you a boost of happiness, even before you take off.

Hotel vs. House?

All of the experts we interviewed agreed that renting a house or apartment is usually the way to go when traveling with kids — Airbnb or FlipKey both offer a wide variety of options in all price ranges. Some rental agencies, like Kid & Coe, specifically focus on family friendly rentals.

Pros: A rental is a good idea if you're on a tighter budget because you can take advantage of a kitchen to save on the costs of dining out, according to Ms. Norcross. And, a rental may be the best option if you're traveling with extended family and would like the space to spread out but still want joint space for some family time.

Best of all, according to Christine Sarkis, the deputy executive editor of the online travel magazine SmarterTravel and a mother of two young children, a home rental will give you space

to spread out; you'll also have room to hang out once the kids are in bed.

“If everyone is crammed into a hotel room, it takes away from the feeling of being on vacation,” she said. Ms. Sarkis recalled her trip to Hawaii in 2015 with her husband and two children. “We had booked a hotel room, and once the kids were in bed, we couldn't turn the lights on, so I would sit on the bathroom floor and read a book,” she said. “It wasn't fun.”

Cons: The downside of renting a home, however, is that you miss out on hotel amenities such as a kids club or a pool with waterslides.

As an in-between, consider staying in a hotel or resort with suites that have kitchens or kitchenettes. And you don't have to break the bank to do so. Ms. Sarkis said that there are plenty of affordable properties with suite configurations, especially in beach destinations. You can search for such hotels on Booking.com, the world's largest hotel booking site, or others including Hotels.com, Expedia.com and Agoda.com.

Visiting (or Traveling With) Extended Family

In theory, a trip with or to see family should be fun, but it can upend the best of vacations, Mr. Stoen said. “The issue when you travel with others is that you often have different schedules or different priorities,” he said. You might want your kids to stick to their normal bedtimes, for example, while your family members are okay with their children staying up until the wee hours. Or, your idea of a good time may be to hang out by the pool all day while family members want days packed with nonstop activity.

Mr. Stoen advised finding a delicate balance between your needs and what everyone else in your group wants to do. For example, opt to spend a half a day with your kids alone or, better yet, if you're the one who wants your kids to stick to routine, loosen up your rules and go with the flow. “By not being so rigid, you'll open up your kids and you to new experiences,” Mr. Stoen said.

Be prepared to be more flexible if you're staying with family members — our experts said that when you're in someone else's home, it's respectful to abide by their rules.

So if you're that uncomfortable staying with your family, opt to check into a hotel instead. “You can still enjoy meals and activities with your family members and have your space to retreat to,” Mr. Stoen said. And if you stay elsewhere, keep any potential hurt feelings at bay by talking to your hosts' before you travel and explaining to them that you're doing so to accommodate you and your family — the more you can make it about you, not them, the better.

Joshua Greenberg, a family travel expert at Protravel, a travel company in New York, suggested having a discussion with family members before the trip about the activities you're most interested in and how you plan to adhere to your kids schedules (or don't). “Talking beforehand can be helpful in eliminating some of the stress that can occur during the course of a trip,” he said.

Nonstop vs. Direct

When traveling with kids, it's important to focus on convenience — not always cost, according to Ms. Norcross. “A cheap flight with a layover looks a lot easier on your web browser than it does when you're at the airport with a screaming toddler,” she said. She advised considering various airports when planning flight travel if it means getting a direct flight — the more connections you have, the more delays and travel hassles you're likely to encounter.

One caveat: If you're in store for an especially long daytime flight, such as the 10-hour journey from New York City to Hawaii, Mr. Greenberg suggested breaking up the trip into two shorter flights, particularly if you have younger children. “You want to let them get off the plane, stretch and run around,” he said.

Make the flight more comfortable for your child (and you!) by bringing along his or her favorite toys, comfort blanket or stuffed animal. (More detailed packing lists are included below.) A travel pillow can also help your child sleep more peacefully. Some parents rely on Benadryl or melatonin to help their children rest, particularly on long flights (results will vary). Check with your pediatrician about what he or she recommends.

Do You Need a Ticket?

Although children under 2 can fly as lap seat children for no cost on most airlines, the savings aren't always worth it in the end, especially on long-haul flights when you may be miserable having your baby sit on your lap the entire time. (If you do decide to go the lap route, be sure to book an infant ticket; on international flights, you may have to pay the taxes for the lap seat, but not the price of a full fare.)

And for peace of mind and safety, Ms. Norcross said that it's best to bring your own car seat on board. If you do choose to check-in your car seat (or a stroller for that matter), note that most airlines do not charge a fee to do so, but check with your carrier to make sure.

Planning Your Days

One piece of advice applies here for children of all ages: Less is more.

Kendra Thornton, the president of the travel company Royal Travel & Tours, a mother of three school-age children and a family travel expert, suggested no more than half a day of structured activity and sightseeing. “Take the rest of the day easy,” she said, “Hit a park or pool, or enjoy some downtime at your hotel or rental,” she said.

And, be wary of overloading your kids on the education, advised Mr. Greenberg, a father of two tweens and a teenager. “Your kids aren't going to have fun if the entire trip is a bunch of tours of museums and historical sites,” he said. “Finding the right balance will make the trip enjoyable for everyone.” If you're in Rome, for example, follow your morning tour of the Vatican and Colosseum with an afternoon of gelato or pizza making.

Combating Common Challenges

You hope your trip will be smooth sailing all the way. In reality, you're likely to encounter a few

bumps along the way.

Too Sleepy, or Not Sleepy Enough

The Challenge: Your trip has taken you to a different time zone, and your kids are having a hard time getting over their jet lag.

How to Combat It: The younger the child, the harder it is to overcome jet lag, according to Dr. Charles Czeisler, the director of sleep and circadian disorders at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. "Infants, especially, can take weeks to adjust to a new time zone because their ability to synchronize circadian rhythms aren't fully developed," he said.

But there some ways to help acclimate to a different time zone.

If you're going to Europe, for example, which is ahead in time zones compared with the United States, have your kids go to bed an hour earlier and wake up an hour earlier than their usual time — it's ideal to start this new routine a week before your trip, but a few days ahead will help, too.

For West Coast travel, do the opposite.

If you land in your destination during the day, be sure your kids (and you) get plenty of natural light. "A walk in daylight can do wonders to help you get over jet lag," Dr. Czeisler said. If your kids are exhausted, don't make the mistake of forcing them to stay up all day in the hopes that they'll crash come nighttime. Dr. Czeisler said that daytime naps of between 30 minutes to one hour will actually help them adjust to their new time zone. "Plus, you and your kids will be miserable if they're cranky and sleep deprived," he said.

Sick Away From Home

The Challenge: Your kids get sick while traveling.

How to Combat It: Always travel with a first-aid kit, and bring it with you onboard (in our packing section, we tell you what it should have). But beyond this kit, in whatever destination you're traveling to, know which hospital is closest to where you're staying, and if you're traveling to a foreign country, memorize the 911 equivalent to call for emergency help.

If you're headed to a country where the quality of the local medical care may be questionable, Mr. Stoen advised buying a travel insurance policy that will evacuate you and your family members back to the United States or a country of your choice should a medical emergency strike. TravelInsurance.com, an insurance comparison site, compares the prices and services of a range of these medical evacuation plans. And for international destinations in general, check with your insurance company to see if there are any limitations on international care, or if you should supplement with a regular travel insurance policy.

Eating on the Road

The Challenge: Your kids are overdoing the junk food or are being overly picky and don't want to try new foods.

How to Combat It: For starters, loosen the reins, at least a little. “Your kids (and you) are ultimately going to want to indulge on vacation. When else is eating ice cream for dinner acceptable?” Ms. Norcross said. While there’s no need to let them binge on sugar all day, every day, allow them more treats than you normally would and emphasize that they’re getting these extra indulgences because they’re on vacation. Be wary of potential sugar-crash-related meltdowns, however, and counter any junk food overload by making sure you have plenty of healthy snacks on hand such as nuts, cheese and fruit.

If you’re in a different country and your kids aren’t necessarily loving Croque Monsieur or sushi, or are unwilling to try them, don’t force them. Doing so will only aggravate them and you. Instead, try dining at restaurants that offer at least one dish that your children will eat such as pasta or a simple entrée like grilled chicken or steak. But don’t stop offering your children different foods- if they see you trying new dishes, they may eventually be open to trying them, too. “It can take kids a few days to feel comfortable in a new destination, but once they do, they tend to be more flexible around eating,” Ms. Sarkis said.

1 Adult, 1 (or More) Children

The Challenge: Traveling solo with children.

How to Combat it: Traveling alone with older kids isn’t as challenging, Ms. Sarkis said, because they can carry their own gear and don’t need to be managed as much. For school-age and teenagers, consider a group tour because you’ll take the stress of planning an itinerary off your plate. Also, with the right family-friendly tour, you and your kids will have a built-in social structure.

It can be more challenging to be solo with infants or toddlers. If you’re flying, Ms. Sarkis highly recommends curbside check-in, if it’s available. “You can get rid of all your luggage, car seats and other baby gear before even entering the terminal,” she said.

When it comes to boarding, take advantage of the pre-boarding option for passengers who need extra assistance, and onboard, have plenty of entertainment for your little ones. Ms. Sarkis recommended carrying wrapped, inexpensive toys and giving them to your children to unwrap throughout the flight. “This strategy kept my kids endlessly entertained,” she said.

Some airlines also offer special assistance for passengers who need help deplaning — find out if your carrier does when you book your ticket.

If you are traveling internationally, it can be a good idea to bring a notarized letter from any other legal guardians explaining that he or she knows you are taking the children out of the country. Many airlines and countries don't require it, but it never hurts to have.

Too Much Tech

The Challenge: All your kids want to do during your trip is spend time on their tablets or phones.

How to Combat It: Ms. Thornton advised setting rules about screen time on your vacation before

you go on your trip — let your kids know how much time they'll be allowed to spend each day on technology and give them the freedom to use it whenever they want. "Remember, you as parents have to participate, too, by not being on your phone or tablet all the time," Ms. Thornton said.

And, to make their screen time more educational, consider downloading apps, games and maps that correlate to your destination.

Especially on international trips, be sure to understand what charges you might incur for WiFi use or roaming data charges. Nothing ruins a nice trip like a hefty bill after the fact for watching shows you can see at home for free.

Reluctant Co-Travelers

The Challenge: Your sullen teen would rather be with friends than on a trip with you.

How to Combat It: A possible remedy to this all too common issue with teenagers is to invite one of their friends along on the trip, Mr. Jeness said. Or, consider taking a group tour where other families with teen-aged children are likely to be on the trip so that your teen has the opportunity to connect with other kids in a similar age range.

Ms. Norcross said that choosing a destination that specifically interests your teen will also help in keeping him or her enthusiastic.

Tired of the Trip?

The Challenge: Managing your kids nonstop on your family vacation has you exhausted, and while they're having fun, you aren't.

How to Combat It: The old adage really is true: Sometimes you need a vacation from your vacation. Mr. Greenberg advised beating vacation fatigue by carving out time for yourself throughout your trip. Hire a local babysitter one night to watch your children while you and your significant other enjoy a nice dinner. You can get names of babysitters through your hotel's concierge, but if even if you're renting a home, don't hesitate to reach out to the concierge staff at a hotel in the area- more often than not, they're happy to help visitors, even if they're not staying at the property.

Also, do a web search of childcare agencies in the destination you're headed to — most agencies have vetted sitters with background checks and references. And, to put your mind at ease about leaving your child with a stranger, you could have a FaceTime chat in advance of your trip with the sitter you're considering hiring.

If you're going the hotel route, choose a property with a kids club or kids programs, where you can drop off your children for a few hours and have time to yourself to relax by the pool or go shopping.

Another strategy, if you're traveling with a significant other or another adult, is to have him or

her watch your children while you sneak off on your own for a few hours. (Be sure to reciprocate the gesture!)

And, make the transition back to home easier, Ms. Norcross said, by having at least a full day or two at home to decompress at the end of your vacation before you need to head to work and your kids have to go back to school.

Packing

Here are some tips to take the headache out of the packing process for your (now well-planned) coming family getaway.

Packing for a family vacation isn't an easy job. Besides taking your own gear, you're also in charge of everything your kids need for the trip. It's a lot to stay on top of, and while you may survive without whatever item you forget to bring along, your children likely won't fare as well without their must-have's whether that's a comfort blanket, usual bedtime book or electronic gadget.

Two Packing Musts for Every Family Trip

The family travel experts we interviewed were in unanimous agreement on two essentials for any family trip, no matter the ages of your kids: packing cubes and a first-aid kit.

- Packing cubes — inexpensive fabric containers (square or rectangular shaped) that zip closed and fit into carry-on bags and suitcases — are an efficient way to separate and organize items for multiple family members, Mr. Jenss said. “Each person gets his or her own cube so you know exactly whose stuff is whose,” he said.

The cubes, available on Amazon.com or at a retailer such as Target or Walmart, come in varying sizes. Mr. Stoen recommends using between three and four cubes for each average sized check-in suitcase, in addition to saving a small area of the bag for shoes or toiletries.

If you're staying in multiple hotel rooms or renting a house with several bedrooms, packing cubes are especially convenient because they act as a mini suitcase of sorts and can be divided among the various rooms.

There is a packing cube that everyone in the family can share: the one designated for dirty laundry — just be sure to bring along a bar of laundry soap or a small bottle of detergent so that you can wash clothes in any sink if there isn't easy access to a washing machine.

The Best Packing Cubes

Eagle Creek Pack-It Original Cube Set

The best choice for most travelers for the third year running, thanks to its functional design and excellent build quality.

What to Pack in the Packing Cube for Each Child

Underwear

Pants and/or shorts, depending on the destination

Shirts (long-sleeve or short-sleeve, depending on the destination)

Pajamas

Rain jacket

One nicer outfit, if needed

Sweaters or a jacket, if needed

Cold weather gear, such as a hat and gloves, if needed

Sun hat, if needed

Swimsuit

Shoes, including flip flops, sneakers or walking shoes and nicer shoes, if needed

Socks

When it comes to toiletries, sunscreen, soap, shampoo, conditioner, a hair brush, body lotion, toothbrush, toothpaste and bug spray should suffice. Deodorant, depending on the age, may also be needed.

Download and/or print a packing list.

- Be Prepared - First Aid Kit

Traveling with a well-stocked first-aid kit and carrying it onboard if you're flying should be a non-negotiable for any family getaway, whether the trip is far-flung or close to home. Mr. Stoen said that he's rarely been on a vacation with his three children where he hasn't relied on the kit. "It could be a stomach bug, an allergic reaction or a scrape, but there's always something we turn to our kit for," he said.

The first-aid kit should include:

Bandages of varying sizes

An antibiotic ointment such as Neosporin

Children's fever and pain reducer

Children's motion sickness remedy

Thermometer

Anti-itch cream

Children's medicine for allergic reactions

Children's stomach ache medicine

Children's cold and flu relief medication

Rehydration tablets suitable for children

?The Best First Aid Kit

Adventure Medical Kits Mountain Backpacker Kit

This compact yet well-stocked kit has the best layout of any we tested, so you can easily access the supplies you need.

Infants

Babies need an endless amount of gear when they travel, Ms. Norcross said. The biggest savior, however, is that many hotels today loan their guests strollers, car seats, baby bathtubs and other infant essentials during their stay. If you're not staying in a hotel, more and more companies today loan out baby gear. "Thanks to these services, it's easier than ever today for parents to travel with their infants because they don't have to tote as much stuff along," Ms. Norcross said.

And, if you're traveling within the United States, another way to lighten your load is to order diapers, wipes, baby food and other basics from an online store, and have these items shipped directly to your destination so that they're waiting for you upon your arrival.

Carry-On Bag Packing List for Infants:

Diapers (Bring twice as many as you think you might need!)

A changing pad

Wipes

Diaper cream

Plastic bags for soiled diapers and clothes

Pacifiers

Bibs

Blankets

Two extra changes of clothes

A hat to keep the baby's head warm

Bottles

Breastmilk or formula

A breast pump, if needed

Teething rings

Medicine for gas relief

Baby carrier

Favorite toys

Other Baby Gear to Be Checked In (if You are Bringing Your Own):

Car seat

Stroller

Portable crib

Baby bathtub

Download and/or print a packing list for infants.

Toddlers

Similar to infants, children who are between the ages of 2 and 4 still need a lot of gear when they're traveling. In addition, their packing list should include plenty of items that will keep them entertained. "Toddlers have a hard time sitting still on plane and car rides so you need to have ways to keep them happy," Ms. Norcross said.

Carry-on Bag Packing List for Toddlers

Diapers or pull-ups, if using
A changing pad
Wipes
Diaper cream
Plastic bags for soiled diapers and clothes
Bibs, if using
An extra change of clothes
Favorite snacks
Entertainment such as books, coloring kits, sticker sets, travel games and a tablet loaded with movies, television shows and games
Other Baby Gear to be Checked In

Car seat
Stroller
Portable crib
Portable high chair or booster
Download and/or print a toddler packing list.

School-Age Children

When your children turn 5, packing for them gets easier. For starters, you probably don't have to lug diapers and the like any more. And, since your kids are used to carrying a backpack to and from school, they can also carry their own backpack on the trip. Mr. Jenss recommended that parents, for the most part, make their children responsible for what goes inside the bag. "The more involved your kids are in the packing process, the more vested in the trip they'll be," he said.

Carry-On Bag for School-Age Children

A sheet with your cellphone number and name, in case you get separated
Entertainment such as crafts, electronic gadgets, along with chargers, and books
Snacks
A water bottle (either buy one or bring a reusable one that you fill after airport security, if you're flying)
A sweatshirt or sweater in case the A/C is blasting. It can also be used as a pillow if it's not.
Download and/or print child's packing list.

Teenagers

To get involved or not? While teens should definitely pack and carry their own bags, Ms. Norcross said, parents would be wise to do a double check to make sure that they didn't forget essentials such as the charger for their cellphone, their ID, any prescription medicine and their eyeglasses. "Your packing job as a parent at this stage is minimal," she said.

Carry-On Bag for Teenagers

A sheet with your cellphone number and name, in case you get separated.

Entertainment such as crafts, electronic gadgets, along with chargers and books

Snacks

A water bottle (either buy one or bring a reusable one that you fill after airport security, if you're flying)

A sweatshirt or sweater

Any prescription medication

Eyeglasses, along with case or contact lenses, along with case

Download and/or print a teenager's packing list.

Always Keep in Mind

No matter how carefully you plan your trip and pack your bags, that trip with your child or children may still not be smooth sailing. In fact, you should almost expect bumps along the way. But keep in mind that these stumbles are all part of the adventure of traveling so embrace them, and enjoy the journey.

About the Author

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