

Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

Child-Friendly Travel Tips

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“Life is either a great adventure or nothing.”
– Helen Keller



Traveling with children can be quite challenging but is often a very rewarding experience. Traveling even the shortest distances and being together as a family override the work it takes to leave the protection and safe walls of home. Children

with a variety of abilities can benefit from (1) seeing different surroundings and sites (to have something new to talk or communicate about), (2) talking or communicating with new people (to practice social skills), and (3) participating in activities or experiences they wouldn't have while staying home (gaining confidence and independence).

No matter where or how far you go to get away for a day or a week-long vacation, preparation is always the key to reducing the stress and angst of leaving the familiar. Choosing a destination, doing your research, soliciting advice from travel-experienced parents, or finding a travel agent who understands the needs of your family... and just trying to remember everything while preparing for the trip, well, you get the point; traveling with children can require a lot of planning and multi-tasking!

Vacation destinations are becoming more sensitive to and proactive regarding the diverse needs of their guests. Using the internet, you can find literally hundreds of links to places (beach and winter resorts, camping sites, cruise ships, national parks, etc.) dedicated to serving the needs of your child and family, from having simple, gluten-free food menus to having trained and experienced staff members available (even child care providers) to assist you and your child in recreational activities. Many places also have equipment on site such as wheelchairs, motorized wheelchairs, walkers, canes, wagons, etc. On these websites, you can read the lists of service amenities and accommodations available to your child and family. You can often find parent blogs or customer comments and ratings about their experiences.

The following tips from seasoned parent travelers may help you prepare for your next big trip:



Traveling by Car

Plan the highway route to your destination before your departure. Always leave home with a full tank of gas. Using a map or GPS, locate rest areas or places for bathroom breaks along the way. Take books, headphones, an iPad or tablet, or other entertainment for the drive. You know your child better than anyone. Take along whatever your children will need to entertain themselves along the way.



Mark places along your route where you can stop and take extended breaks before your child, or children, get cranky and restless. For day trips, pack a cooler with food and forget cramming everyone into a table at a restaurant and wasting valuable time. When on the road for a few days, buy lunch to go and GPS to the nearest park so the kids can let off steam before getting back into the car. As much as you want to have enough entertainment in the back seat(s), leave as much space as possible to keep children from being too crowded. Pack as much as you can in the trunk (or in a car top carrier). Whether in a car, plane, train, or bus, dress the children comfortably in layers to remove should they get warm or uncomfortable.



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Traveling by Train, Plane, or Bus

Rehearse. If no one in your family has flown or ridden a bus or train, check your local airport or stations to see if they offer “practice events” that allow families to go through security, boarding, and a realistic run through of procedures so kids will understand what to expect. Call the carriers directly. If an in-person visit is unavailable, look for videos online depicting the realistic process that families experience in the airport or station. Checking off the special services box when booking online might not be enough. Follow up later with a phone call to ask any other questions that you may need to have answered regarding special accommodations for your family. At the ticketing counters, employees can direct you to special services areas, and sometimes an attendant may be able to help your family board and stow your luggage or equipment.



Bring distractions. Pack favorite small toys and games along with snacks and a few new items that will hold your child’s attention. Thanks to recent changes in government regulations for airlines, most now allow the use of portable electronic devices for the entire flight as long as they’re set on airplane mode. Download a few new apps before your trips. Charge devices completely before boarding (there may not be a USB port available on board some smaller or older planes).




Hotels

Think modern. Hotels constructed in 1993 and beyond must legally conform to disability standards (like having a certain number of rooms with roll-in showers). Hotel pools built or altered after 2013* must have one or two means of entry and exit. Some have a lift for disabled guests. Review the emergency exits outside your room and in other areas you might frequent in the hotel. If your child is young or a disability impedes his/her mobility, consider requesting a first floor room/suite in case of an emergency.



Book a suite if at all possible. Chains like Residence Inn, Embassy Suites, or Hyatt Houses offer a living area and bedroom for not much more than a regular room (depending on the area and/or season). Having your entire family in one room for hours at a time is stressful enough. A little more space will give all of you a little more space for rest and relaxation, and you’ll all enjoy downtime a little more.



Make specific requests for your family’s needs. Send an email along with your online reservation and make your requests—whether it’s a mini fridge to store medicines, a bench in the shower for accessibility, plastic cups instead of glass, feather-free pillows due to allergies, or a room on the first floor. If you haven’t had a reply within several days, call the hotel’s booking agent and review your reservation and requests. Take the name of the representative for future contact. At least a week prior to arrival, call the hotel representative you spoke with before and ask again for everything you will need. Call the morning before your arrival and remind them again at check-in.



Bring the comforts of home. Many children have a hard time sleeping at hotels because they can be so different than home. Pack a small, portable white noise machine, a light-reducing eye mask, or a favorite pillow, blanket, or stuffed animal for sensitive sleepers.



Be patient. Seasoned parent travelers will tell you that traveling gets easier with every trip because they now have their routine down to a science. Your first big trip may have its challenges, so take heart – the more you travel, the better you get at it, and the more fun you will have. Traveling with children takes a lot of planning and organization, but the benefits will far outweigh the work. Leave the familiar behind and enjoy a simple day trip or a more extended vacation. The more accustomed your children become to traveling, the better travelers they become!



Resources:

Pool Professionals. 2016. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Pool Lifts: Things We Know. Retrieved June 2016 from <http://poolprofessionals.com/ada-pool-lifts-things-we-know/>

*In January 2012, the Department of Justice published a guidance document in response to the questions raised after the Americans with Disabilities Act 2010 Standards for Accessible Design was officially published. The guidance document titled “ADA 2010 Revised Requirements: Accessible Pools – Accessible Means of Entry and Exit” is an accessory document to the published ADA 2010 Standards, intended to help facilities covered by Title III of the ADA understand specific requirements and compliance.

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