

Tantrums While Traveling

Looking forward to a road trip? Scheduled for a flight with the family? As much fun as we all hope traveling will be, it's almost impossible to go anywhere without someone getting at least a little crabby.

Eileen Kennedy-Moore, the author of "What About Me? 12 Ways to Get Your Parents' Attention (Without Hitting Your Sister)," is a clinical psychologist and the mother of four children born within an eight-year period. She's criss-crossed the country--and gone all the way to Australia--with her brood, and she's got some tips for us about both avoiding problems and handling unhappy kids.

Her favorite strategy: Prevention.

"Traveling is hard on kids because it disrupts their routines. Being in unfamiliar places, with long days, constrained seating, strange food, and a strange bed can be exhausting and sometimes overwhelming for children, whether they are toddlers, teenagers or in between," she points out. "This means that everyone will find the experience more enjoyable if you plan ahead to make the travel as child-friendly as possible and if you intervene quickly at the first sign of crankiness."

To prepare children for the trip, start by explaining what will happen: the security checks at airports, the waiting, the time changes. Ask them what "loveys," small toys, books and games they'd like to take along.

What else is important?

- ❖ Food. Because children may feel desperately hungry at odd or inconvenient times, tuck some easy-to-eat snacks in your bag.
- ❖ Surprises. Novelty is appealing, so bring along activities with which to surprise your children. These don't have to be expensive, and they can be as simple as cat's cradle, tic-tac-toe and other games.
- ❖ Pillows. An overtired child is a tantrum waiting to happen. A travel-style pillow can encourage a child to rest--and the squishy ones can double as a squeeze toy.
- ❖ Music. Having the right music can help a child feel more cheerful or relaxed.
- ❖ Movement. Kids simply are not capable of sitting still as long as adults can. "Take lots of breaks to let your child move around," advises Kennedy-Moore. (This can mean pulling the car into a roadside rest area every hour or it can mean researching which airports have children's play areas.)
- ❖ Travel at "kid pace." Your goal in traveling as a family is to enjoy each other, not necessarily to see every single site. "Do shorter visits to fewer places and have a good time rather than exhaust the children and end the day with a tantrum," Kennedy-Moore continues.
- ❖ Choices. The older your children, the more you can involve them in planning where you go or what you do, but even little ones can have some say. Offer two or three choices that are all acceptable to you (e.g., "Do you

want to visit the monkeys or the elephants first?"). Offering too many choices too often will be overwhelming for children, but a few options can give kids a positive sense of control.

What if it's too late for prevention and your child's tantrum has already hit? This is a parent travel nightmare! You're probably exhausted and cranky, too, and you may also feel trapped by the circumstances and embarrassed by disapproving looks or comments from other travelers. Ignore everything except your child, advises Kennedy-Moore: that's who counts right now.

Her strategies for solving problems:

- ❖ Get some space. If possible, help your child out of the difficult situation. Getting outside is best, but at least move to a less crowded area such as a hallway or a bathroom. "Getting some breathing room can help your child calm down, and it also reduces how much you're disturbing other travelers--which means you and your child no longer have an audience for the tantrum."
- ❖ Allow time. While your child is emotionally flooded, he or she is physically incapable of thinking or of comprehending your reasonable suggestions. Muster compassion for how overwhelmed your child must be and stay close, listening for a downshift in the tone of the crying or yelling. That's your signal that you can start to touch or talk to your child.
- ❖ Reflect feelings. "In the history of humanity, the words, 'Calm down!' have never soothed anyone," reminds the psychologist. "What does help is acknowledging your child's feelings."

By reflecting your child's feelings, you show you understand, and you also wrap those feelings up in words, which makes them seem more manageable. You could say something like: "It's hard to wait," "You're fed up with sitting," or "You've had enough of being in strange places." You may not be able to do anything about the cause of those feelings, but just acknowledging them lightens their burden for children.

- ❖ Use the "foot in the door" technique. Salespeople know that if they can get customers to agree to a small thing, they are more likely to agree to a larger thing. Once the worst of the storm passes, use the same technique to help your child inch out of a tantrum. Start with a minor request that your child is very likely to agree to, such as "Here's a tissue. Why don't you blow your nose." You can follow that with "How about a drink of water?", "Let's go sit on the bench," and "Would you like a snack?" With each little decision, your child is regaining self-control.
- ❖ Soothe your child's senses. After the climax of the tantrum, your child will feel raw. Sensory activities can be soothing. For a little one, this might mean a cuddle on your lap or listening to you sing softly. Other children might appreciate washing their faces gently, eating or drinking, chewing gum, listening to music, smelling something pleasant, looking at pictures,

or getting a soft shoulder scratch. If possible, try to wait until your child's body seems fully relaxed before returning to the difficult situation, to allow your child to recover enough to avoid a second round of a tantrum.

- ❖ Don't scold. The experience was much worse for your child than it was for you. When your child seems calm, just say matter-of-factly, "Okay, let's head back." If you know the difficult situation won't last much longer, you can also mention that.

Links:

What About Me?: http://www.ParentingPress.com/b_wam.html

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