

Six Tips for Smooth Air Travel with Children

By Olynda Smith

As Montessorians, we know how essential the prepared environment is for helping children feel calm. Airports and airplanes are overstimulating and stressful settings that make it difficult to be at ease. Restrictions on movement in an airplane can make even the most even-tempered child melt down. To ease the strain of traveling, parents often do things they usually do not at home, like offering extra screen time or sugary treats. To make your next trip a smooth, joyful experience, try these six strategies:

1. Manage Expectations

Much of the travel day will be spent doing things with your child(ren). It's helpful to manage your own expectations. Look at air travel as a grand adventure with your children; then you may be less frustrated when you don't get a moment to yourself. Your child will need to know what to expect as well. Before your trip, read books about air travel. You can also "play" airport and airplane by acting out the travel experience: waiting in line, boarding the plane, dealing with a delay (or moving quickly through the airport to make a tight connecting flight), keeping belts buckled, waiting for luggage, etc. Make sure to include both exciting and challenging scenarios. Try changing roles so that you are the child and she is the adult. You may find her more sympathetic to your needs on the travel day if she has pretended to be in your shoes.

2. Pack in the (Screen-Free) Fun

Using electronic devices to pass the time during travel can be a siren song that is difficult to resist. And while letting your children watch a show or two on a long flight may feel inevitable, it doesn't need to be the default; there are many things you can do that don't involve a screen. Some items to pack in your carry-on include new books (we visit the library just before a trip); pictures and/or written information about your destination; sticker books or activity books; a blank notebook and markers or crayons; and small containers of playdough. For the youngest travelers (babies and toddlers), you can pack anything they haven't seen before. Store a "for travel" activity bag on a high shelf or tucked away, and add to it throughout the year; this way you'll have it ready without having to scramble just before your trip. There is so much to do in the airport and on the plane that you may not need to reveal the bag until well into the first hour of the flight. Pull out only one thing out at a time, and wait until your child has totally explored the activity before you dip in and get the next. (Make sure you have enough in the bag for the return flight.)

3. Enter the Wonder Together

There is much to do in an airport, including running, spinning, and stretching, since little bodies will need to be still for so long in the air. Find a good view of airplanes taking off, and talk to other families who are also traveling; experience elevators, escalators, and moving walkways. Once you've taken off, explore the wonder of air travel. What do you see out the

window? What do all the buttons and levers around your seat do? You don't have to have all the answers. Just wondering out loud, "I see flaps lifting on the wing. I wonder what they are for?" is wonderful food for your child's curious mind.

4. Games, Games, Games!

Air travel offers hours of semi-unstructured time with your children. Tic-tac-toe, I Spy, Twenty Questions, and rock-paper-scissors are great in-your-seat games. Or try a simple memory game: place 4 or 5 objects on the tray table in front of your child. Have him investigate them, then close his eyes while you take one object away. When he opens his eyes, he must guess which one is missing. Try a rhythm game, where you tap out a simple rhythm on your lap with your hands, and ask your child to copy you. Or tell a story together: You start, then point to her when you want her to take over. Go back and forth in this way until you've finished the story.

5. Pack Protein, Dump the Sugar

Offer your child healthy snacks with plenty of protein: nuts, cheeses, beef jerky, edamame. Avoid empty calories like crackers or high-sugar treats. Snacks that require some processing (clementines, pistachios, etc.) do double duty of filling bellies and passing time.

6. Take Your Time (and Plan for Delays)

Extra time can be the difference between a delightful ramble to your gate and a meltdown—add 30 minutes to what you think you'll need to get through the airport. Make time for natural curiosity. If you give your little one time to explore before boarding, she'll be more likely to cooperate on the plane, or if you need to make a tight connection. And if you encounter delays, having extra snacks and activities up your sleeve (how about an airport scavenger hunt?) can save the day.

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