Airplane Travel with a Baby

By Elizabeth Pantley, author of Gentle Baby Care and The No-Cry Sleep Solution

Question
We're about to take our first airplane trip with our one-year-old. We flew quite a bit before she was born, but now we're not sure what to pack or how to make this trip successful.

Learn about it
Even if you racked up your share of frequent flyer miles before your baby was born, forget what you know of travel so far. Flying with a little one is a whole different story.

If you fear turning into one of those families we've all met aboard planes — those with squalling, unruly, squirming children who tend to bring out the same traits in their fellow passengers — take heart. My oldest child, Angela was just 14 days old when she took her first flight, and since then, I've taken many more trips with my four children. I *know* that you can travel with your little ones and enjoy the process. Forethought and preparation are the keys.

Planning the trip
The details of your trip often can mean the difference between success and disaster. Keep these ideas in mind as you plan:

- Examine all aspects of the journey when you book your flights. Aim for direct flights so that you can avoid changing planes. If you have to make a change, avoid short layovers that give you too little time to get from gate to gate, and conversely avoid long layovers that require lots of idle time in airports.

- When you make your reservations, give the agent the ages of all passengers. You may learn some important rules such as:
    - FAA regulations allow only one lap-child per adult. If you are traveling with two children, and only one adult, one child will require a seat of his own. (Not that you would want to travel with two children on your lap!)
    - Some airlines do not allow newborns to fly, check on age requirements.
    - Some airlines offer discounted prices for children's tickets.
    - Most airplanes have only one *extra* oxygen mask in each row, which means you can only seat one lap-child *in each row*. If two adults are traveling with two children, consider sitting across the aisle from each other, or two behind two.
    - Some airlines count carseats or strollers as extra baggage.

- If your child falls asleep easily and stays asleep, try scheduling travel for during your child's nap or sleep times. If you have a finicky sleeper, on the other hand, avoid traveling during usual sleep times, as your baby may just stay fussy and awake.

- Reserve your seats in advance to be sure your entire party sits together.
    - If you have an infant, ask for the bulkhead (front row) and request a bassinet.

    - Contrary to popular advice, I think it’s best to avoid the bulkhead with older babies and toddlers, because these seats offer neither under-seat space nor seat pocket, so you'll have to store all your toys and supplies in the overhead compartment. Also, in the bulkhead, the food tray pops up from the armrest, effectively trapping you in your seat when your table is laden with food.
    - Don’t put your child in the aisle seat, as the food cart and passengers carrying luggage could injure your child.

- Ask what special features your airline offers for families. Some companies offer children’s meals, bassinets, gate check for strollers, or early boarding privileges.

- If you can afford to do so, buy a seat for your child and bring along his carseat. Your baby is used to being buckled into his carseat, and the familiarity may make it easier for him to sit still and even sleep. This only works though when your child is able to fit comfortably in the tight seat compartments. A toddler with long legs will be scrunched between his seat and the seat in front of him. The added benefit of bringing a car seat when you can, is the safety feature of having your child in a protective seat on the airplane. Make sure your carseat bears a sticker that says it's FAA approved for air travel, so that it’s not turned away at the gate. You’ll need that seat anyway to get to and from the airport at home and at your destination. (Carseat rentals are typically expensive, and availability is often limited.)

- Visit your baby’s pediatrician a week or two before your trip to be sure your little one isn’t harboring an ear infection or other illness. If possible, avoid exposing your child to other children the week before the flight so he's less likely to catch one of those many kid-carried bugs.

- If you will be visiting relatives at your destination, make a family photo album and "introduce" your baby to these new people via their pictures prior to the actual meeting.

- If your baby will be taking any medication on the day of the trip (such as a decongestant or pain reliever), be sure to test it out *before* the day of travel to gauge any side effects.

- Decide if you’ll need a stroller at your destination. If you don't think you'll need a conventional one, at least consider bringing a lightweight portable type for use in airports; this will give you a free hand as you tend to tasks such as luggage check-in and pickup, while keeping your child safe and close by. If you opt to take your regular stroller, you can usually check it at the gate or right at the door of the airplane.

- Alternatively, a sling or soft-pack carrier can be very helpful if your child still likes to be carried and is light enough for you to carry this way for long walks through the airport.

- Dress yourself and your child in comfortable layers of clothing. Airplanes are often cramped and hot, but sometimes too cold.

- Use these checklists (and make lists of your own) to ensure that you don't forget anything.

Packing your carry-on

The right carry-on bag can be a lifesaver. Make sure that your bag is easy to lift or roll, and that it falls within the airline's size limitations. Pack an organized bag that carries:

- Lots of diapers. Plan for an unexpected layover or delay.

- A baby blanket, which is good for multiple uses.

- A diaper-changing pad in case you end up changing your baby on the floor or on a dirty changing table.

- Plenty of snacks. Often the only snacks on airplanes are peanuts, which are a major choking hazard for babies. Also, snacks are a great distraction for a bored or antsy child. Even if you've ordered a child's meal, it might show up when your child is asleep or isn't hungry, or your child may not like the menu. A few ideas for easy-to-tote snacks include:
    - Baby food
    - Dry cereal
    - Pretzels
    - Crackers
    - Bagels
    - Bread or rolls
    - Dried fruit
    - Lollipops

- Drinks. Bring along favorites in a sippy cup, drink-box, or bottle. You may even want to pack these in a soft lunchbox cooler.

- Infant pain reliever in case of ear pain or other discomfort. (But don't try anything new; make sure it's something your baby has tolerated well already.)

- Lots of new toys, or old favorites that have been hidden for a few weeks. Avoid noisy toys that will annoy fellow passengers. Great travel toys include:
    - Crayons and a small pad or sticky notes
    - Stickers and sticker books (Sticker books have the advantage here; their stickers are reusable if stuck on their specially surfaced pages, whereas a sticker placed on paper is there for good — which is fine, too, but a sticker book prolongs the activity.)
    - Building toys like Legos TM or Duplos TM
    - Paperback books
    - Puppets
    - Tiny plastic animals, cars, or dolls
    - Playing cards (Go Fish or other games that feature interesting cards)
    - Tape or CD player with kid music or books on tape

- Bib

- Extra pacifiers, or your baby's lovey, special blanket, or toy

- A book, magazine, or activity for you when baby is sleeping or playing, should you be lucky enough for that to occur!
- A small medical kit with bandages
- Wet wipes for diaper changes and cleaning baby's hands and face
- Empty plastic bags for soiled diapers
- If your baby uses a bottle, bring several. It's usually easier to take along premeasured powdered formula and small bottles of water for mixing.
- A complete change of clothes for baby and an extra shirt for you (spitup and spills happen).
- Toothbrush and toothpaste for unexpected layovers.
- If you're traveling as two adults with two children, divide up the children's supplies into two separate bags in case your seats are separated on the airplane.
- Consider packing toys in a small child's backpack for any child old enough to carry one.
- A small belt-bag (fanny pack) is handy for tickets, ID, and cash. Wear it on the front of your body, not the back.
- Test your bag in advance to be sure it's not too heavy!

The night before the trip

- Get a good night's sleep so that you can be more relaxed during your trip.
- Pack all of your bags and put them in the car or near the front door so you're not scrambling when it's time to leave.
- Review your checklists.

At the airport

- Get to the airport early.
- Check as many pieces of luggage as possible. Avoid overloading yourself with things to carry.
- Keep in mind that most airport rental carts have to be unloaded to go through security, and that your child may have to be taken out of the stroller or backpack when you go through the metal detector.

- When you check in, tell the desk attendant that you are traveling with a baby. Let her know if you have a stroller or carseat with you.

- Change your baby's diaper immediately before boarding the airplane.

- Avoid breastfeeding or bottle-feeding your baby just before boarding as he may fall asleep and wake up crying as you struggle to carry him and your belongings to the gate. Wait until you are seated and unloaded, then feed him and maybe you'll be lucky and he'll take a nap!

- Avoid feeding your little one just prior to boarding. Save food and drink for when you're on the airplane, as these carry great entertainment value.

- Consider bringing your stroller and checking it at the gate. This way you can carry baby, the carseat, and all your belongings right up to the airplane gangway. Smaller strollers can be brought on as carry-ons, and an attendant will take bigger strollers as gate-checked items. (Find out where to retrieve these.)

- If traveling with two adults and multiple children, ask at the desk if one adult can do the early-boarding and set up your carry-on bags and carseat(s). Usually the pre-boarding time is extremely short, and you'll have to rush to get the carseat secured and carry-on items organized before all the other passengers begin to board. This will also allow your little ones some last-minute exercise before boarding with the second adult.

- If you have a connecting flight, go straight to the gate upon landing. Sometimes it takes longer to get gate-to-gate than you expect. Any waiting time is best done closer to your next gate.

On the airplane

- To help your baby's ears adjust to changes in cabin pressure, encourage swallowing during takeoff and landing. You can do this by breastfeeding, or offering a bottle or pacifier. Toddlers can take a drink, nibble on crackers, or suck on a lollipop. (Look for those without a gum or chewy center, which can present a choking hazard.) Use the feeling in your own ears to determine when to give your baby something to swallow, or feed your baby when you see the flight attendants preparing the cabin for takeoff or landing. If your baby is sleeping soundly, don't feel you need to awaken him; he'll be fine.

- Flying in an airplane can cause dehydration, which occurs much more quickly in a child than with an adult. Keep your baby well hydrated with water, juice, or milk.

- Changing diapers can be a real challenge. Some airplanes have changing tables, but these are typically very small, and while great for newborns a tricky challenge for bigger babies. You can ask the flight attendant for the best place for changing. A small baby can be changed on your lap on or the pull-down tray table. (Be sensitive to the people seated near you if you do this.) Some airlines will allow you to use the flight attendant's jump-seat; some will let you change your baby on the floor near the galley or in the bulkhead area. If you have an older baby, consider using pull-up disposable diapers on the flight, as these can be pulled up with your little one standing. Use a plastic bag from home or the airsickness

bag for disposal in the bathroom trash. Remember that, since flight attendants handle food, they can't handle dirty diapers. (And they probably don't want to, either.)

- The flight attendant will usually heat a bottle for you. Be sure that you shake it well and test it thoroughly, as the galley system often makes things very hot.

- If your baby is unhappy and begins to cry, take a deep breath and focus your attention on your baby. Fellow passengers who are unhappy about the disruption may forget that you have as much right to be on the airplane as they do. They also may not know, or may forget how difficult it is for a baby or young child to be patient during a long flight. Your best defense against an unpleasant stranger is to say with a smile, "I'm doing the best I can." And then tend to your baby.

- Unless you have to, don't rush off the plane. Let your child play until most of the passengers have disembarked. This will prevent you from standing in the slow-moving line in the aisle while carrying an armload of luggage and trying to keep your baby happy.

International travel

- If only one parent is traveling, make sure you bring a letter of permission from the other parent. This should be signed and assert that the parent gives permission for the child to leave the country. You may not need this, but it's an easy document to bring along just in case.

- Get passports for all travelers. It's easy to obtain a passport for a baby. Passport application forms and instructions are available at your local post office. Plan ahead though, as this can take weeks to obtain the passport after making application.

- Take advantage of the room available in a larger airplane by taking your baby for walks when it's safe to move about the cabin.

At your destination

- Determine in advance where your baby will sleep, and find out if you can rent or borrow a crib, if you need one. If you plan to co-sleep you may need to move the furniture around, or even pull the mattress off the bed to make a safe sleeping situation. (Most hotel housekeeping staff will help with this if you ask politely.) Other equipment such as carseat, stroller, highchair, and safety gates often can be rented or borrowed.

- Find out if your brands of diapers and formula are available at your destination. If not, send a box ahead of time.

- Ask if your accommodations have been childproofed. If not, bring along some outlet protectors and a role of duct tape for on-the-spot childproofing.

- Pack a child-safe nightlight to make those middle-of-the-night potty runs and diaper changes safe.

- Make sure that the vehicle you'll be picked up in or that you are renting has enough seatbelts for everyone, plus room for luggage and your stroller.

- Upon arrival, you might want to collect your luggage and then send one adult for the car while the other stays at the curb with the bags and children.

- Remember to keep your carry-on bag organized, including snacks, for your return flight home.

For the frequent flier

Make a master list of those items you typically take along. Be sure to include those you're more apt to forget. Keep your list on your computer, if you have one, so it's ready to print out when it's time to pack.

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