



Traveling with Children: Tips for Parents

By David Fassler, M.D.

Summer is almost here and many families will be traveling to a variety of vacation destinations. Many children enjoy traveling. It is an opportunity to see new places, meet new people and have new experiences. However, travel can also be anxiety provoking for some children. Being in large crowds, flying, sleeping in a strange bed, or eating unfamiliar foods can cause concern for some children. The following suggestions may help parents minimize a child's anxiety when traveling:

1. If your child is old enough, let him or her help plan your trip. Let them learn about where you're going and how you're going to get there.
2. Leave plenty of time. Nothing is more stressful for parents or children than rushing to catch a plane or trying to reach a destination on time.
3. Keep children occupied, especially on car or plane trips. Bring food, books, and games.
4. Try to establish a relatively regular routine, even when traveling. Children are reassured by predictability.
5. Let your child bring something familiar from home. It may be a stuffed animal, blanket, or a favorite toy. Encourage kids to bring pictures of friends, family, and pets.
6. Plan plenty of bathroom and snack breaks. Try to keep kids comfortable and well fed.
7. If traveling for an extended period, help kids keep in contact with friends back home. Let them call, send letters, postcards, or e-mail to friends.
8. Don't force kids to tolerate extended "adult activities" like long museum visits, formal dinners, or plays in languages they don't understand. Plan child oriented activities--children's museums, parks zoos, and toy stores.

Most children like to travel and welcome the opportunity to spend time with one or both parents. Despite the excitement, certain degree of anxiety about being away from home is common. However, some children experience extreme anxiety that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to travel. They may be anxious about flying or worried about getting lost. They may be uncomfortable sleeping in an unfamiliar place. If such worries persist, or a child experiences episodes of intense anxiety or panic attacks while traveling, parents should talk to the child's pediatrician or family doctor, who can provide a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional.

This article, written by Dr. David Fassler, was reprinted by the Title I Dissemination Project, Inc. with permission from the American Psychiatric Association (www.psych.org) for educational purposes. Dr. Fassler is a board certified child and adolescent psychiatrist practicing in Burlington, Vermont. He is a Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Vermont College of Medicine. Dr. Fassler is also a Trustee of the American Psychiatric Association.

