

Taking the kids -- air travel 101 for holiday fliers who rarely take to the skies

Eileen Ogintz | Tribune Media Services
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Get ready!

Jammed airports, delayed flights (on-time performance is the worst in a dozen years), missed connections, lost and mishandled bags (14,000 a day!) and families who rarely fly struggling to shepherd cranky kids through the crowds and long security lines.

Welcome to holiday air travel 2007. A third of holiday travelers -- millions of people -- AAA reports, fly just once or twice a year and aren't familiar with the ever-changing rules or the little tricks that can make air travel more bearable.

This column is devoted to all of you infrequent family fliers out there getting ready to travel on some of the busiest weeks of the year -- AAA says nearly 5 million of us will fly over the Thanksgiving holiday and another 9 million at Christmas -- so we can gather around crowded tables ("I thought once you're in high school you don't have to sit at the kids' table!") with annoying relatives (You look like you've gained a little weight, dear...) and stuff ourselves with roasted turkey.

Let's not forget the thousands of kids affected by divorce who will be flying solo this holiday season to visit non-custodial parents. For an extra fee, younger children can be supervised by airline personnel (check your airline's Website for specifics about unaccompanied minors), but teens often must fend for themselves, which is no easy task should they become stranded someplace because of a canceled flight.

I've spent more holidays than I can count on airplanes and at airports talking to other holiday travelers. Here's hoping that these 10 kid-tested holiday rules for air travel will help you get where you're going with a smile -- or at least without anyone in your gang having a public meltdown:

1. Book nonstop flights and those early in the day whenever possible, especially when flying with kids or sending kids as unaccompanied minors. Delays get worse as the day progresses. Consider smaller alternative airports, especially when flying in and out of New York City airports, where delays have been particularly bad. Check in online from home to save more time. Or, if you're driving to the airport, reserve a parking space through www.parknflynetwork.com.

2. Got your quart-sized Ziploc? I always stash a couple of extras in my carry-on bag. While each passenger is limited to 3 ounce bottles of liquid and gels in one quart-sized zip-top bag, you can bring larger amounts of medication, baby formula and food, breast milk and juice. Make sure to have enough in case your flight is delayed or you miss a connection. You won't be able to buy formula or baby food at the airport. Just make sure to tell the security officers you have them. Check www.tsa.gov for the latest security rules.

3. Send ahead any must-haves -- gifts, the outfits for the family holiday pictures, skis, surfboards,

etc. You can send via FedEx ground, UPS or one of the many services like www.luggageforward.com, www.luggageconciierge.com or www.luggagefree.com. It won't be nearly as expensive as having to get new gear if yours gets lost.

4. Invest in small rolling bags for each member of the gang -- even your 3 year old can roll hers. Always carry on medicine, a change of clothes for the baby (T-shirts for everyone else in case of spills and sweatshirts, planes can be chilly).

5. Give yourself extra time to find a parking space at the airport and to get through security. Gone are the days when you will be bumped to the head of the line if you're checked in for your flight 20 minutes early. Also, take the kids to the bathroom before getting into the security line.

6. Buy a seat for your infant or toddler so that you can use your safety seat onboard. The FAA "strongly urges" their use. www.faa.gov/passengers/fly_children/crs/. Babies are far safer restrained in their safety seats in turbulent skies. They're a lot more comfortable too in their familiar seats, which means you'll have a more comfortable flight too. See if your airline offers infant fares. Wheel your child up to the plane in his stroller and "gate check" it. The stroller will be waiting for you at the gate when you arrive. **Check out the parent-invented device that allows you to wheel your car seat -- with your child in it -- through the airport (www.gogobabyz.com).**

7. Explain to your toddler and preschooler why they must allow the security officers to take a "picture" of their blankie, sippy cup or stuffed giraffe. Reward them for their cooperation.

8. Pack plenty of healthy food in your carry-on. Don't count on getting anything to eat onboard the plane. Airlines often run out of the sandwiches you can purchase in flight and you may not have time to buy anything before you board, or even find anything you want the kids to eat. Fill the kids' water bottles and sippy cups after you've gone through security.

9. Bring double or triple the diapers and entertainment you expect to need -- in case you are stuck on the tarmac or in an airport for hours. You won't be able to get any diapers at the airport or onboard the plane and you can't count on the movie (if there is one) being suitable for kids (unless, of course, you're lucky enough to be on a plane with an individual entertainment system.) Bring a laptop or invest in a portable DVD player -- they are less than \$100 -- some holiday stories (it's the 50th anniversary of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas") and old-fashioned entertainment, including a deck of cards and a pad and paper. When was the last time you played cards or tic-tac-toe with your child? Check out the Websites www.familyonboard.com or www.madallie.com for other travel-sized toys and games.

10. Stay calm if you know you are going to miss your connection or worse, your flight is canceled. Make sure you've programmed the phone numbers for the airline and your favorite hotel chain into your cell phone and call as soon as you know your situation. Make sure teens know what to do if they're traveling alone and miss a connection (identify themselves immediately to a flight attendant and gate agent who can help. Call you so that you can talk to the gate agent rebooking their flights).

As for those of you who know the drill, be patient and kind to novice fliers. Santa will notice.

(For more Taking the Kids, visit www.takingthekids.com, where Eileen Ogintz welcomes your questions and comments.)