Practical Tips for Taking Children on a Road Trip

“Are we there yet?” is a familiar question when the family is on a trip. After hours of frazzled car travel, missed meals and naps, and frequent potty breaks, a car trip might seem more like a mistake you don’t want to repeat. However, planning ahead can make the road trip a fun experience for both you and your children.

Plan your trip with your children. Get their ideas about things to do and see. Children who are involved in the planning will look forward to the activities; they will have more ownership and more fun.

Children travel best when their stomachs are full and their bladders are empty. Start each day with a good breakfast, and plan nutritious snack breaks at least twice a day. Schedule naptime if you possibly can, whether in the car or at your destination.

Think ahead. Take materials to occupy your children’s time and keep them engaged while traveling. Most families have personal audio devices, DVDs, and electronic games to fill some of the time.

Think beyond electronics. Pack a travel bag for children with favorites such as crayons, storybooks, foil, chenille sticks, and drawing paper. However, add a few new things, or even wrap them up to be distributed at different stages in the trip. Stickers, markers, and small travel games can add excitement to the trip. Toss in a roll of aluminum foil to make foil sculptures along the way.

Expect a longer trip when children come along. Plan rest stops at least every two hours so your children can stretch and burn off energy. Make these stops part of your vacation fun: toss a frisbee, play catch with a beach ball, jump rope or blow bubbles. Have a picnic snack under a tree.

“Where are we?” can be a game for children old enough to read a map. Pull out the computer or electronic tablet or take along a map or atlas (yes, the old-fashioned paper map) to let children follow the trip on the map so they can see the progress you are making. Ask them the name of the highway or the name of the next town. They will be less likely to bother you with, “Are we there yet?” if they chart the progress on the map.

Explain your expectations for behavior before you leave. Be sure to include instructions about what to do if the family become separated in a public place. Continually encourage your children throughout the trip. “I know it has been a long day in the car, you are being very patient. Thank you.”

Play travel games together like alphabet games naming colors or makes of cars. Or start a trip project, such as taking a family photo or selfies at each stop, or ask an older child to create a trip journal or notebook.

Keep a positive attitude and laugh at the little things. Keeping children quiet and well-behaved at all times when your family is far from home and has changed all its routines is not realistic. If you realize ahead of
time that your children may be cranky and unpredictable with all the changes, you won't be as upset when things come up.

When you return home be prepared for a day or two of frustrated children and lots of laundry! Settling back into routines after a vacation can be difficult for both you and your children. Give your family at least a day of unpacking and resting before re-entering everyday life.

Spend an evening looking at the photos and laughing about the road trip. Remember the fun you had and talk about your favorite things about the vacation. You made priceless family memories.

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