



Mom, are we there yet?

By Apryl Chapman Thomas

School's out and warmer weather is here. That can only mean two things—summertime and family vacation. It's time to load up the car and hit the open road. It Doesn't matter what mode of transportation you chose—driving, flying or rail—your children will spend a lot of time together in a small space, with no escape route. Before you throw up your hands and

stomp back inside your house, refusing to travel with your children until they turn 16 or 18 years old, there are ways to travel distances beyond the grocery store with your children—even young ones—and still keep your sanity.

Are we there yet?

“I have one word for moms: portable DVD player,” says Debbie Feit of

Farmington, Mich. “I purchased one for our children prior to a four-hour trip, and we got our money's worth.” Sharon Wren of East Moline, Ill., and Dawn McBaine of Clifton Park, N.Y., embrace the DVD route as well. “My laptop with a DVD player was a lifesaver on an eight-hour drive home from a vacation in Indiana,” Wren says. “I brought along a bunch of movies that my kids liked. Even my 15-year-old nephew paid attention when we put in

'Monsters, Inc.," McBaine purchased a DVD at Wal-Mart to survive a 28-hour car ride to and from Myrtle Beach with her three girls. "It really made a difference in the trip," says McBaine.

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In addition to DVD players, moms pack the "old reliables" in the back-seat, such as small games, toys and coloring books. "I keep my eyes open in the few weeks before a trip for interesting books and small toys," Feit says. "Party stores are a good place because they sell small and inexpensive party favors." Special car games tend to work well with children of all ages, especially older children. A good one is keeping track of different license plates on the road and at the end of the trip, award the winner with a special treat. "A few days before we leave, we each pick a current song on the radio, and count how many times we hear it," says Julie Sturgeon, of Greenwood, Ind. "As long as no one in the group has control over the selection, such as bringing that CD along in the car, any part of the song counts, so the best way to win is pick something being used in a movie promotion or television commercial."

"We make the car a real party atmosphere. Someone starts "This Old Man," and the next person has to fill in the verse with new rhyming words. So for instance, 'this old man, he played one ...' and the next person in line says 'he played knick-knack with a hot-cross bun.'"

Mom, are we there YET?

With some pre-planning and creative ideas, and input from your children, your family can have an enjoyable car ride to wherever the roads take you this summer.

Remember to bring extra clothes for everyone in case of any emergencies, along with extra snacks, water and juice and a sense of humor.



SanitySavers

Stacy DeBroff, a mom in Chestnut Hill, Mass., and president and founder of Mom Central, www.MomCentral.com, offers this advice:

Put a box of toys, a soft suitcase or a diaper bag between two kids in the back seat. It gives them boundaries and also serves as an ad hoc table for games.

Keep a flexible itinerary. One of the advantages of driving is that you pass interesting sites and signs along the way. Stop for anything that might be fun or just get you out of the car for a while.

Take a break every couple of hours. You don't have to stop for long, just give everyone time to use the restrooms or have a diaper change, and run around a bit. When you stop for meals, eat outdoors so your child can play while you relax. Or find several destinations to stop and explore along the way so you and your child will have something exciting to anticipate.

Activities

Make up stories about people you see in the cars you pass. Have one person start, and everyone tries to add a little to the story.

Find the color: For younger kids who can't read, this game is a bit easier. The first one to find the color outside the car wins. Or have each member of your family pick a car color and race to see who can reach 50 cars of that color first.

If you fly...

For many families, it is inevitable that the summer vacation will include a trip or two to the airport. There are ways to keep the family happy and sane during long flights and possible layovers.

Look for a nonstop flight, or at least a flight with minimal stops or transfers. The less time families spend getting off and on planes, the happier everyone will be. Also, if possible, schedule flights during non-peak times, such as late night (another added bonus - little ones might sleep through the flight) or during lightly traveled days, Monday through Wednesday.

Try to book bulkhead seats, which give younger children a little more room to play (Downside is no room under the seat in front of you to stow extra gear).

Very young children need help "popping" their ears during take off and landing. Keep them awake while ascending or descending and

have a bottle ready - the sucking will help normalize pressure in the ears.

Strollers can be checked at the gate on most flights, making the trip to the baggage claim move that much faster.

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Get your child involved. Talk to your kids about the airport, planes and people you see. Describe boarding, take-off, cruising and landing. Prepare them, so they'll know what to expect and won't be overwhelmed at the airport. Post a countdown calendar at home, marking off each day until the flight.

Burn off energy before the flight. Walk around

the area while waiting to board. Use every opportunity to walk before boarding.

Pack non-perishable foods, such as crackers and juice boxes. Many carriers are starting to charge for food, or offer only beverages and light snacks.

If you're traveling with infants or toddlers, don't forget formula and diapers or pull-ups. Also, pack a change of clothes in your carry-on luggage, just in case of layovers, delayed baggage or spills.

Encourage your child to pack a favorite toy, some books to read, activity books and maybe an electronic game (don't forget the batteries) in their carry-on bag. Again, portable DVD players or laptops with DVD capabilities can entertain children during the flight. If you go with this option, make sure to pack head sets.

The safest way for infants to fly is to be securely buckled into an approved, infant car seat.