

Honey I Shrank Your Luggage Allowance: Packing for Families

by JoAnne Noel, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Traveling with children is not for the faint of heart. But we love travel and our kids do, too, so long as we manage it well for them.

Part of that is bringing the right stuff. This isn't another packing list though; I'm talking about how you approach packing for families.

Here's what I think: Traveling with kids requires a different mind-set from the days when all you needed was your carry-on and your sense of adventure. Since the terror threats of August 10 have changed what we can bring in our carry-on luggage, it's getting harder to get by without checked baggage. Parents and others traveling with youngsters might as well embrace the change.

What are you taking?

Let's start with some general considerations.

The longer you're away, the more you'll miss the familiar. A long weekend without the baby's beloved play mat would probably be fine, but if you're going for 8 days you might get tired of finding new comfy, safe and interesting places for her to wiggle.

What's your tolerance for doing laundry on vacation? Some people say no way, while others view it as welcome downtime. This has a huge impact on the amount of clothes you bring. Many resorts have on site laundry facilities, which may make this decision easier.

Think about kitchenware. Many families have breakfasts or snacks in the room. The space required for a few familiar cups and dishes may be worth it -- particularly things like no-spill sippy cups and the cereal bowls with Mickey or the princesses. Skip anything that can't be properly cleaned with a quick rinse.

If you plan to rent a car, you can buy all the consumables you need, from oatmeal to diapers, once you get there. Some experienced travelers prefer ordering from a grocery delivery service, such as Goodings.

Your resort or hotel may provide many of the basics. Disney resorts, for example, can easily supply pack-and-plays for cribs (with, I hear,

Disney-themed sheets), or bedrails for pre-schoolers.

You may want to rent the big stuff. Do you need a high chair for your condo? An exersaucer for your pre-walker? The Walt Disney Travel Company recommends All About Kids, though an internet search will yield other providers of rental equipment.

How old are your kids?

The smaller the child, the more stuff he or she needs. Any infant needs lots of diapers, a million burp clothes, and several outfits per day. I cannot imagine spending more than a day or two with a child under a year old without doing laundry. (Though it would certainly be a dream come true -- tell the Cast Member that if you get selected in the "Year of a Million Dreams" promotion!)

With infants and toddlers, you also have to carry more specialized food-related equipment. If your child uses bottles, bring a bottle brush and one of those dishwasher bottle baskets to keep it all together. We traveled with a "starter kit" of familiar baby food and then shopped.

The younger the child, the more helpful the familiar will be in other regards. The hotel's pack-and-play can feel more like home with a favorite blanket and the usual lullabies on CD. Bringing the right assortment of the familiar-and-comforting without packing the whole house takes some thought. Give yourself time to examine your routine for a few days, and make lists.

You will also need to be strategic about entertainment. Generally, the more creative a toy, the better. Building sets are a pain to keep together, but are compact and versatile. Dolls or action figures may work for your story-creating child. You probably don't need a lot -- it's Disney World after all -- but a well-worn favorite can be just the thing for an afternoon break.

How do you put it all together?

So now you're trying to put a potty seat in a hard-sider you bought during your "carry-on only" years. Meet the traveling parent's friend, the hockey bag (equipment bag). Big, shapeless, cheap, and bulletproof. Your oddest shaped items can be safely tucked away in these canvas behemoths, even if you also use one or two traditional bags. Do check with your airline regarding maximum weight and dimensions, though; these bags are so accommodating, before you know it you'll need a goalie to lift it.

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Within that luggage I add another organizing layer; a mesh bag for each person. I purchased mesh beach bags with drawstrings, the sort you use for damp towels. They're especially helpful if you are living out of the suitcase for all or part of the trip -- you can find anything without throwing it all over the bed.

Refining wardrobe options can make your life a little easier on arrival. Lay out each outfit and roll it up: socks, underwear, shirts, and pants. No guessing or negotiating. You will need to take into account variable circumstances -- one or two dressier choices, some warmer pieces for layering. You can then wrap each bundle in a big elastic band. (Banding or Ziplocs also work very well to keep spare outfits together in your daypack.)

Getting it all there

Your airline may have special rules for luggage and equipment. Some allow you to check your child's car seat and/or stroller in addition to the base luggage allowance (Air Canada, JetBlue). Others only substitute piece for piece, so you can check the stroller instead of a bag (Southwest). Some give you extra carry-on allowances for lap children (American); others don't. There's usually some accommodation available for all that extra gear, you just have to check with your airline.

Just about every carrier allows gate checking of car seats/infant carriers and strollers, a very handy perk (especially since it doesn't count against your luggage allowance). Tell the check-in agent you want to gate check the item; you will probably receive a special luggage tag to attach to it. You use the item right up to the door of the airplane, where it will be picked up and packed at the front of the luggage compartment. As soon as the plane lands, it will be brought back to the door of the plane.

In your carry-on, bring anything you'll need shortly after arrival, like swimsuits, or tropic-weight clothes. Include prescriptions and over-the-counter things in pill or powder form, like the decongestant for little ears. Keep in mind that only 4 ounces of liquid over-the-counter medication can be put in carry-on luggage so look for chewable or dissolving tablets or the new "strip" medications.

If your child has a "lovey," a special toy or blanket, keep it on you. Floppy Puppy does not go under the plane. This vital item stays inside the backpack until we reach the hotel room. The only thing worse than losing it in the luggage would be leaving it in the gate area of a connecting airport.

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The longer the trip, the more distraction you have to supply. Experienced parents stuff the carry-on with surprises; dollar store trinkets like new coloring books, or travel treats from the local Disney Store. These things also fill in any holes in the traveling toy collection.

Maybe my "travel heavy" philosophy isn't for you. However, you can be comprehensive and streamlined in your packing, and accept having more checked luggage for a while. We've often lost our bags, but they always catch up with us within 24 hours. If your luggage does get lost, well, you've got your swimsuit and a change for everyone in your carry-on, so go start your vacation. Let the airline get all that stuff to your hotel!

About The Author: JoAnne Noël is a stay-at-home mom of two young children who are "great little travelers". She prefers writing about travel to her previous life writing about government, and hopes to keep it that way. JoAnne lives with her husband and children in Nova Scotia, Canada and is planning a second family trip to Orlando in January 2007.

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