

# How To Pack for a Trip With Young Kids and All That Dang Gear

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Maggie Hohle Jun 11, 2019



**T**raveling with little kids can sometimes feel like acting out an advertisement for the latest gear. You may find yourself wondering, “Is all this absolutely necessary?” The answer is, probably not.

Sure, traveling with small kids can be a huge joy or a big headache. While the most important thing is attitude, the second most important thing has got to be packing. But whether your trip is a month in South America or a weekend at grandmother’s house in Michigan, you don’t want to spend your precious time and energy being a slave to your kids’, or your own, stuff. Here’s how to prioritize packing what you really need, and how to fight the impulse to just bring too much.

## Pack, then unpack.



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In my family, we always have our kids pack for themselves — the first time around at least. If your child is old enough to put on their own shoes, they're old enough to consider what they like to have with them when they goes out, even if it's to the grocery store. So give your child a size-appropriate suitcase, backpack, or satchel; some ideas of what you'll be doing; what the weather's like; and how much walking, swimming, or zip lining is involved; and let them pack.

You'll be surprised at the choices. It's fun if everyone can do this at the same time, and make a game of inspecting each other's luggage, asking questions about the "why" of the "what." Round two involves taking things out and/or replacing some items with other,

more practical ones. A raincoat, for example, may be more appropriate than a fancy sweater.

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**Don't overdo it with clothing.**

When we lived in Japan, two friends came to visit us as part of their two-month summer world adventure. Each of them carried just enough clothes for a week. They were university professors and accomplished travelers, and they taught me that a week's worth of clothing was enough for a trip of any length at all. I've tried to follow that rule since.

Unless your journey is a business trip, or involves a significant event like attending a wedding, your regular day-to-day clothes will be the ones you're most likely to wear, no matter how old you are. And if by chance you don't pack enough, there's always the opportunity to make a memory of shopping in a new city or country.

You're often more adventurous when you're out of town, stepping into stores and boutiques you might not have considered if you were at home. Children are also often more aware of their surroundings, because they're still learning how to navigate social situations, and may point out something in a shop or something about people's behavior or accents that you wouldn't otherwise have noticed. And shopping is itself a great way to interact with a new culture, even if it's in your home country.

**Don't be a slave to marketers.**

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The reality is that the more stuff you have been told is “essential,” the more money you’re spending and someone else is making. The parents I polled agreed that hand sanitizing wipes are really helpful to have on hand when soap and water aren’t immediately available, that parents traveling with infants should have a change of clothes, and that extra batteries and working headsets can be lifesavers.

Beyond that, a lot of bulkier “essentials” are not actually essential at all. If your kid is very little, you can choose a baby carrier over a stroller. If your child is bigger, choose a fold-up umbrella stroller over some fancy — and much bulkier — brand. If your destination involves cobblestones, though, a sturdier stroller may be required. Bring the equipment to match the destination.

**Safety and rules: Do your research.**

Photo: Tomsickova Tatyana/Shutterstock

Airlines have different rules, but the FAA is the best place to wrap your mind around the regulations. According to the FAA, kids who are big enough for booster seats in cars don't need to bring them along; on planes, the seatbelts are sufficiently safe. Of course, if you'll be renting a car at your destination, you'll want to make sure to indicate that you need a booster seat when you make the reservation. Even if you will need a booster seat at your destination, you can check it with your luggage, giving you one less thing to carry onto the plane.

Kids up to 24 months old can ride on your lap if you're cool with that. You can even rent a CARES harness, designed specifically for planes for kids over a year old and between 22 and 44 pounds — if you don't feel like buying one just for your trip. If you do want to bring aboard a car seat, it has to be FAA approved and can't be wider than 16 inches. Beyond these basics, you need nothing extra, in my opinion. Keep it light and simple, and do without if you can.

When it comes to portable cribs, you're probably best off bringing your own. Just be sure your baby is already used to sleeping in it. Try using it at home for at least a week before the trip, as then it will feel familiar and welcoming. Too often, the one you might have reserved in the rental or hotels is overused and doesn't lock into place properly — so you'll be happy you brought your own. The good news is you can check it with your luggage, and its long, narrow shape means it can fit into trunk spaces where a regular suitcase might not.

## **If you bring electronics, use them thoughtfully.**

Photo: [Kdonmuang/Shutterstock](#)

We all battle the pull of electronics and the way the tablets and phones suck us out of our environment, and thrust us into an electronic neverland, making us automatons. So having a discussion about everyone's expectations and setting guidelines prior to takeoff is a must. Preloading movies, games, even podcasts take the guesswork out of the online experience.

Stitcher is a great mobile app that even recommends new shows based on your original choices, as are SoundCloud and Pocket Casts. You can set up playlists ahead of time, so there's no question of what your kids are doing on their phones once you're in the air. If your family uses Spotify, you can all ready your playlists.

Remember that once it's in the bag, or not, that's the way it's going to stay. So take the time to make the decision that works for your family. On the one hand, leaving electronics at home might even open up a brand new world to your children.

On the other hand, many parents we spoke with use electronics in an educational way, having kids practice a language with Duolingo or look up maps and possible activities online in advance. Tripit is a super app for families as well as business travelers. It automatically inserts confirmation numbers you forward to plans@tripit.com and allows everyone to add to the plan, whether it's information about your Airbnb or the address of a cool restaurant.

**Or skip the tech and go old school.**



Photo: [Karen Struthers/Shutterstock](#)

Some parents use the novelty of air travel as an opportunity to go old school, sharing games from a pre-internet past, packing a deck of cards for playing gin rummy on the tray tables, or a tool to warm up small motor skills like the classic Etch-A-Sketch.

With [YouTube](#), the older kids can even learn some sick techniques from professionals and challenge themselves to put in some time on the flight, maybe even sketching their siblings or nearby strangers (ask permission!) If you don't feel like carrying even a mini version of the old-timey toy, you can use an online version.

Mad Libs, bingo, and even travel Scrabble pack tightly into a kid's carry-on bag. Check your local toy store or go online to shop together with your kids. While Bananagrams — or the simplified My First Bananagrams for the littlest ones — may be a little impractical for the plane itself, it's a great game for layovers. All the tiles fit snugly into that fun and compact banana bag and can be spread out on a table at the airport food court or at a computer station.

Rory's Story Cubes, which have images that inspire storytelling, are a favorite for kids eight and up, too. A blank drawing pad can open up hours of fun. My kids enjoy making “monsters” by folding a piece of paper accordion style, and each person taking a part of the monster, from head to foot, unfolding it when the whole thing is done.

## **Be present.**

Photo: LumineImages/Shutterstock

The best way to be present on your trip is to make it about the destination and the experiences, not the stuff. Make sure the kids are as involved as possible in the planning and packing. It's never too early to get used to taking care of yourself.

The “fun bag” is the carry-on where kids store their books, maps, paper, markers or crayons, snacks, electronics, and extra clothes in case of spills or accidents. But we've also had times when a kid has forgotten to pack enough underwear or T-shirts and we've

helped them find a way to make do by washing in the hotel or B&B sink, or shopping on the street. These are all growing experiences.

As part of being present, if your next trip brings you to a new destination, take time to observe how others seem to pack and travel with their families. You may learn a few tricks.

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