

Kids' Corner

Easy Riders

Pave the way for backseat harmony with these tips for the open road

IT'S A FORM OF ONE-UP-MANSHIP. ONE PERSON SAYS, "I GOT CHARGED 10 CENTS EVERY TIME I ASKED, 'WHEN ARE WE GONNA GET THERE?'" Another counters, "I had to pee in a cup from Albany to Orlando." We all have our war stories—the indignities we suffered as children on family road trips. As parents ourselves, we vow never to resort to age-old idle threats like, "If you don't



stop that, I'm going to turn this car around, young lady." But how do you stay sane on the wide open road with a carful of antsy travelers?

• As with a NASA launch, it's all about careful planning and execution. Your mission is to keep your astronauts comfortable, fed, and entertained. To make things go smoothly, consider carrying a master list of everything you pack—food, clothing, toys, etc. Doing this will help you more easily track things from your car to motel to final destination. And if it's computer-generated, this list can be used for future trips. Even if list-keeping isn't your strong suit, don't worry. We've put together a multitude of useful travel ideas on the common pitfalls of road travel with kids. Read on so that you, too, can meet the challenge of this family-togetherness test and pass with flying colors!

Laying in Supplies: The Food and Drinks

In preparation for lots of drive-time munching, pack tissues and wet wipes. Be sure to have a resealable plastic (food) bag of each in the front seat. With messy toddlers and little kids, you may want to prevent stains by throwing a plastic tablecloth over the backseat before strapping in their car seats. Stock the car with resealable bags for garbage in the front and backseats.

To keep food safe for serving, you'll need a good cooler, ice packs, and a constant supply of ice (restock when you get gas). Drinking water varies widely around the country, so throw a big

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jug of emergency water in the backseat (it can help rejuvenate your radiator, too).

Think of packing foods that nature has already prepackaged—bananas, oranges, hard-boiled eggs. Avoid foods with sauces or drip potential, chips coated with the dreaded nacho cheese orange goo (deadly on seat covers), or things that crumb too easily (crumbs can turn itchy on small thighs on a long trip).

Stick with foods that are easy on the stomach, like bread, rice cakes, small boxes of cereal, or peanut butter crackers. Avoid serving too much fruit or you'll be visiting rest stop bathrooms frequently. Although individually packaged apple-sauce and yogurts are workable in the car, it's best to choose foods that don't require utensils.

For drinks, pack large, plastic, lidded cups (spillproof for younger kids). This way, you can get juices at convenience stores, but you won't be at the mercy of those wide-mouthed, splash-prone glass bottles. Alternatively, bring a cooler full of frozen juice boxes. You won't have to wait in line for sodas, and the juice boxes will be nice and cold during the first leg of the trip.

When traveling with babies, fill bottles at home with the water you'll need to mix formula, then store in an insulated bag. Find a convenience store or a friendly restaurant; they usually won't mind zapping your water in the microwave for a few seconds to warm it up. After you have it at about the right temperature, add your powder formula and voilà.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

The sight of the yellow arches fills most kids with joy and most parents with dread. Fast food is the most common pitfall on long car trips, a wasteland of fat, salt, and sugar. In order to avoid this nutritional minefield (it's everywhere, after all), you have to stand firm. If your resolve dissolves, opt for grilled chicken sandwiches over nuggets (pure saturated fat), and choose a baked potato, when possible, over fries. Even though fast-food salads are loaded with nutrient-poor iceberg lettuce, split one between the kids for a little added crunch and textural interest.

Finding other food can be an adventure on long trips: Hunt down an old-fashioned diner, one with counter stools, a good jukebox, and a perfect grilled cheese sandwich. In preparation for a long car trip, research the foods commonly associated with the areas you'll be passing through. Make a game of it: Going through St. Louis? Try its legendary toasted ravioli. In Philly, go cheesesteak. If you pique your children's curiosity beforehand, they will be more likely to brave uncharted culinary territory. Use the Internet to print out pictures of and historical notes on the region's gastronomic highlights.

In this era of fat-consciousness, it's easy to find low-fat snacks on the road. It's sugar that's insidious. If you buy prepared snacks from convenience stores along the way, be a careful reader of

entertaining the troops

When traveling in the car with small children, allow extra time to reach your destination. Count on stopping every hour for the children to stretch their legs and run around. Churches are good stopping spots if rest areas aren't available, as they often have open, grassy areas and playgrounds. Traveling at night or during nap times is a good way to make up some miles. Put blankets, pillows, and any necessary stuffed animals in the backseat at the ready.



Your local party goods and dollar stores are perfect places to find inexpensive forms of amusement. Wrap each new toy as a gift, to make the excitement last. Caveat: Do not buy travel games with small pieces that are sure to get lost immediately under the backseat. Maze books, magic pen books, stickers, a magnetic puzzle of the country, and even car bingo can keep everyone entertained. For long car trips, the book *Miles of Smiles* is filled with car games. Picture-puzzle books (like *I Spy* and *Where's Waldo?*) can be made into games as well: One person names an object for the rest to find in the picture.

Even if you eschew the "plugged-in" feel of Gameboys or videos in the car, bringing a personal stereo for each child allows everyone to listen to his or her first choice, whether that's Britney Spears or *Goodnight Moon*. Borrow books-on-tape from your local library or even make your own: Record your kid's favorite stories on audiotape so they can have the stories "read" to them in the car.

Bring lap desks and art supplies for projects. Dated spiral-bound drawing pads can be a nice way to chronicle a trip, with each child keeping the finished pad as a souvenir (parents can annotate). Encourage older kids to "journal" with a cool pad and a set of gel pens.

For smaller kids, always keep a change of underpants or diapers inside the car with you, rather than in the trunk with the luggage. For older kids, encourage a layering approach to dressing—when one child is chilled, having him don another layer may be preferable to making everyone endure the car heater at full blast.

labels. Beware of words ending in "ose" (i.e., sucrose, glucose, and fructose), as in the ubiquitous "high fructose corn syrup." All are sugar in sheep's clothing. Kids respond to sugar differently. You know your own children—if sugar gives them an instant blast, avoid it on long car trips.

On a similar note, many motels offer "complimentary continental breakfasts." While convenient, the choices are often laden with sugar. If you want to avoid the sugary cereals and sticky buns on offer, lay in a supply of bagels, whole-grain muffins, or soft flour tortillas and take breakfast on the road.

And although it wreaks havoc with your pace, it's preferable to stop to eat at a rest stop or picnic area. Feeding a small child in a car seat poses a choking hazard—you may not have enough time to unstrap and unclip before coming to his or her aid. Stopping for meals also prevents kids from snacking constantly out of boredom, a habit that starts early in life. Make mealtimes special and encourage kids to entertain themselves in the car and enjoy the ever-changing scenery outside their windows.

by LAURA REILEY