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Benefits of Travelling with Children
By Judy Arnall

We brought our two children (a toddler and a baby) to England and Ireland on our first family overseas trip in 1996. During that first trip, we were introduced to the travelling perils of sick infants on cars, trains, ships and aircraft, and jet-lag sleep schedule disruption, and the wonderful task of hauling cumbersome baby travel gear around. Since that trip, our family has grown to five children, and we have logged another six overseas trips. Our recent holiday was to Australia with our five children, ages 5 to 16, for six weeks. During our flight home, listening to a mother in front of me coping with a toddler tantrum, I reflected that it is easier in many ways to travel with older children. They can carry their own bags and they can immerse themselves in books or movies during long flights. But older children do have their own challenges, such as becoming downright uncooperative when facing situations that they don't like, picking fights with each other when bored, and becoming just as expensive as adults when venues charge full fare for kids over 12.

Although it can be hard work for parents, children of all ages benefit immensely from travelling. Travel is a multi-sensory learning experience that is much richer than textbooks, videos or classrooms. In addition to the obvious academic facts that they absorb from visiting science centers, zoos, aquariums, art galleries, wildlife parks and museums (such as the quantity flow model demonstrating Pythagorean theorem at the Perth science center), children learn many important life-skills while travelling, such as these:

- Perspective: They learn that home is actually not that bad, compared to some of the rest of the world. Tripping over each other in a 500 square foot cabin helped us appreciate that we have a home to call our own.
- Group decisions: They learn that they must either provide positive leadership to the group, or must go along with group decisions. Not everyone can get their way even some of the time.
- Consideration: They learn that when we are guests of others, we must be considerate of their plans, their home and their possessions. They learn to ask permission, that they must limit noise and clutter, and cannot just raid the fridge. They also learn how to socialize with hosts.
- Adaptability: Things go wrong, such as missing sleeping bags, not enough pillows, unexpected weather, no transportation, lost mp3 players as well as dealing with clean laundry too wet to pack. Children

learn to accept and/or make-do. Our motto when things went wrong while travelling was "Oh well". Sometimes it was either laugh about it or cry about it!

- Problem solving: When adapting to new situations or circumstances, children learn how to solve problems. They can brainstorm options and help choose the best ones. Our 15-year-old and ten-year-old son got lost on a hiking trip. I was astounded at their problem-solving ability to find their way back to the camp, all the while not knowing what camp, city or state we were staying at in Australia.
- Different rules: Rules and courtesies we take for granted in our country are not the same in many other countries. For example, chewing gum is illegal in Singapore.
- Patience: Travel requires so much waiting around that children learn to be patient. They wait in long lines for check-in, for security, and for boarding. They wait for take-off, they wait for food, and they wait for the washroom. They wait for landing and more line-ups. It's endless.
- Self-entertainment: Children learn how to cope with boredom from lack of media devices and electronic devices. When mp3 players, DVD players and laptops are not available for playtime, they get into sandcastle building, drawing, card games, board games, word games, scavenger hunts and good old-fashioned conversation.
- Socializing: They learn to be polite to relatives that they have never met before, and discover to their surprise that they find them likeable. They learn that strangers can be friends for travelers and it's okay and enjoyable to strike up a conversation with them.
- Logistics: For older children that wish to get involved in trip planning, they learn useful skills such as how to book itineraries, rentals, and accommodations. They can learn how to acquire documentation such as passports, visas and consent letters. They learn the protocol for security at airports and museums. They also learn mapping, budgeting, and documentation (photos and journals) skills. They learn how to secure transportation and groceries.
- Tolerance: Travelling with family members means that for a few weeks or days, family members live in close proximity with each other full time. That means siblings constantly in each other's faces. Children get very practiced at learning how to cope with different quirks, personalities and people's feelings. They may discover a side of a sibling that they never noticed before and actually quite like.

With all these travel benefits, it's no wonder that many families take several vacations a year together. Whether staying in a tent, trailer, cabin, cottage, hostel, hotel or visiting relatives, travel provides an experience of a lifetime for both parents and children. Guaranteed, it will never be boring. Have a fun and safe summer!

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning *Parenting Speaker*, and *Trainer*, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling book, **"*Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery*"** and the new DVD, ***"Plugged-In Parenting: Connecting with the Digital Generation for Health, Safety and Love"***
www.professionalparenting.ca (403) 714-6766 jarnall@shaw.ca

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