

Keeping Kids Happy on Long Car Rides: Tips and Tricks

by Sharlene Rollins, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I was first confronted with this daunting dilemma while managing my neighborhood toy store. A frazzled mother came in hoping to find some ideas for keeping her busy kids happy on a car trip to her parents' home. After working there for six years before becoming a mother myself, it had become clear that parents quite capable of tackling everyday parenting issues often freeze up when it comes time to bringing their little ones on long trips in the car. They have no idea how they are going to avoid chaotic meltdowns, hours of screaming, or whines of, "Are we there yet?" There is hope and with a little planning most, if not all, of these situations can be avoided.

Let's get the obvious distraction tactics out of the way so we can get into the really good stuff. A portable DVD player, along with some classic favorites or some new, never-before-seen stuff, can be a lifesaver. You can bring along favorite upbeat tunes for you and the kids, always a good idea. Allowing iPods and mp3 players is also an option but you may want to set limits on them. Be sure to discuss these limits with the kids beforehand. I think the same applies to hand held games like Nintendo DS - set up any limitations or turn-taking guidelines you'd like to have beforehand in order to avoid disagreements later.

Now let's get started!

About a month before your trip grab a laundry basket and go through the house with two thoughts in mind: a) what toys/activities are their favorites and b) which of these can be used in the car? For the younger kids, you may not want to let them know you're doing this and for the older ones they might be able to do this themselves.

Great! Now that you have your pile of stuff, pick out the best and keep it hidden until the trip. This way you will be armed with toys that have a "like new" appeal but are also bankable favorites for your trip! Some ideas include card games, favorite stuffed animals, action figures, Polly Pockets and Transformers, etc. Many times I'll pack each kid a little bag of their own, but as our family has grown I have found it easier to keep one fun bag at the ready rather than deal with too much stuff underfoot in the van.

Next, make a trip to the nearest dollar store and purchase new items like sticky stretchy toys, activity and coloring books, blank and lined

notebooks, noisemakers (it's better to hear a harmonica than a screaming toddler), small puzzles that can be done on a book on a lap, magnetic play boards, sticker activities, chewing gum (in case you need to drive through any higher altitudes it will help ears to "pop"), and my personal favorite, glow-in-the-dark necklaces, bracelets, etc. for when it's too dark to do anything else. Be sure to buy the non-toxic ones, as many children tend to put them in their mouth at some point! We even placed them around the hotel room as night lights for the kids to navigate their way around a strange room at night.

Consider making your own games - older kids can help with this! Car Bingo is a classic in my family. Simply take squares of paper, and then with a thick black marker and a ruler draw five lines down, and the same across. Then after a trip to the dollar store put stickers of farm animals, cars, trucks, road signs, wildlife, dogs, birds, cats (whatever you manage to find) in each square, make one card for each player and simply have the kids mark them as they spot the things on their cards - a line is a bingo! Then the cards get passed along and a new game begins. The best way to mark them is to get them laminated and then use a dry-erase marker, since you'll need just a facial tissue to rub off and start fresh.

Other games include looking for neat license plates, red barns, counting horses (or other items), or the classic "punch buggy" game minus the hitting; we slap the seat in our car! Another classic with my family involves a deck of cue cards with a thing to find on each one. Road signs, railroad crossings, emergency vehicles, churches, speed limits, pylons, animal crossings, gas stations, favorite restaurants, etc. We make up the cards beforehand and to play we deal out three at a time. When you spot one of your items you put the card in your lap, score a point, and draw another card. First to five wins! Variations can involve each item having different point values, or event cards like "steal a point card from another player," "choose one card and place it in your points pile," "lose (or gain) one point," "trade hands with another player," etc. Be creative and inventive - maybe you can add in landmarks or rules specific to your route of travel!

A final thought, consider stopping along the way at fun, free, or cheap places. It adds time but makes for a memorable journey. When our family was faced with a 21-hour drive we opted to spread it out over three days and stopped in at little museums, aquariums, a cave tour, a mall with a huge old merry-go-round inside, a state park, and other neat stops along the way. Before your trip, make a list of the cities you will be driving through and then Google the area to see if there are any neat places to stop that might be a perfect side trip for your kids. Taking these moments where and if possible can relieve a lot of the stress and

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tedium of a long drive with the kids.

By planning ahead for fun you are sure to arrive at your destination a much happier family and will have made positive car trip memories that will last a lifetime. Happy Trails!

About The Author: Sharlene is a mother of three and has a ton of experience with kids from her years as a nanny, managing a toy store and now with her own busy kids, one of whom has special needs. Sharlene considers herself a Walt Disney World fanatic.

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