

FLYING WITH KIDS: NEVER A DULL FLIGHT WITH CHILDREN ON BOARD

The indignities and annoyances of air travel can be profound.

We fly among those who kick seats. Those who do not pay any mind to bodily hygiene, hog the arm rest, invade personal space, recline too far, don't let you recline, drink too much and persist in unwanted advances.

It is often not mankind's finest moment.

But the targets of our collective scorn are most often victims themselves: The parents of a child run amok or crying relentlessly.

We recently experienced a trial to try the patience of even the most compassionate traveler. A small child's meltdown began before anyone boarded the plane. The flight was delayed. The child kept screaming, and the parents kept trying to quiet him with candy, which made me dread the sugar crash ahead. Sure enough, I was seated behind the screamer who tested his lung capacity the entire way. It was nearly a four-hour ordeal, and the parents seemed to have given up soon after takeoff.

I tried my level best not to cast beseeching looks in the parents' direction: Try something! Do something! NO MORE CANDY, for God's sake!

I remembered all too well my own harrowing experiences the times I have flown solo with a baby and toddler or toddler and preschooler. Our children have been frequent fliers since they were less than a few months old. If there is an opportunity to embrace overpreparedness, this is the moment. I've carried on an entire bag with books, puzzles and coloring books to keep little ones busy and in their seats. I have exited airplanes hoarse from reading and telling stories for hours at a stretch.

You rely on the kindness of



strangers, and for the most part, air travelers are exceedingly kind toward any parent struggling to attend to a restless or cranky baby. Some thoughtful parents know that a little compassion can go a long way. One California couple last year wrote notes and passed out goody bags for fellow passengers when they traveled with their 14-week-old babies for the first time.

But even the most prepared parent can lose control. When they were younger, my children would suffer excruciating sinus and ear pain when the plane began its descent. I tried everything: decongestants, air-pressure-relieving ear plugs, chewing gum, sugar-free lollipops, gummy bears, pieces of ice. We learned to avoid the seats around the wings and stopped flying on 50-seaters because it made the air pressure pain worse.

We've had some tense moments with a crying child.

I was reminded of a return flight from Paris my husband and I took in the era before children. A woman seated near us loudly complained and refused to sit in the same row as a parent flying with a young child. The child's behavior was far superior to that adult's. But questionable behavior cuts both ways. One traveler said he watched a mother change her baby's dirty diaper on his seat when he got

up to use the restroom.

A mother confessed that she gave her toddler Benadryl in an attempt to calm him during a flight. Rather than making him drowsy, it had the opposite effect and made him uncontrollably hyperactive. So much so that he nearly bit off the tip of her nose.

Even our seasoned young travelers, who now travel without disruption or discomfort, reminded us that you can hit turbulence at any time. The fourth-grader lost her tooth on a recent flight and began bleeding profusely, using all the napkins in my purse. We had to ask the flight attendant offering the beverage service for extra napkins to stanch the blood flow. The child's tray looked like a murder scene. The flight attendant quickly handed us a stack of small square napkins. Friendly skies, indeed.

The best approach seems to involve extending some empathy to fellow passengers, those with children and those who get to sleep or read on a flight. Already, travelers may well be exhausted, on their third connection, bumped from a previous flight or on their way to see a sick or dying loved one.

Some airlines are trying to ease the passenger entanglements with child-free zones. AirAsia, a low-cost airline in Southeast Asia, began offering a "Quiet Zone," largely reserved for those 12 and older, earlier this year on its long-haul flights.

But when flying with the masses, keep in mind that it's easy to put on a pair of headphones and block surrounding noise pollution. It's much harder to deal with an olfactory assault while sandwiched between the window seat and aisle.