

Planning a Family Vacation

Whether you're travelling far away or nearby, you can make your next family vacation fun by planning ahead and keeping everyone's needs in mind. A family vacation doesn't have to be long to be memorable. A four-day break close to home can be as enjoyable as a two-week trip to the mountains, whether you're travelling by plane, train, bus, or car. Even the shortest vacation runs more smoothly when you plan ahead.

Planning ahead

Whether you're travelling with young children, teenagers, grandparents, cousins, friends, or neighbours, planning ahead will help ensure that things go smoothly and that everyone has a good time. Below are some tips.

- *Encourage your child to take part in planning the vacation.* Involving your child in planning the trip makes it more fun for everyone. Younger children might enjoy looking at pictures in a travel book or on a tourism or photo-sharing website. Older ones might enjoy looking over maps and planning excursions or visiting websites about your destination. Whenever possible, offer choices of activities so that children feel more involved.
- *If older relatives or friends will join you,* involve them in the planning as well. Everyone is happier when they have a say in what they would like to see or do.
- *If you're travelling with more than one adult,* plan to do separate activities on some days to accommodate the needs of different age groups. Teens may not want to go to a children's museum but may be interested in taking in another cultural event nearby.
- *Choose to go where families are welcome.* A growing number of hotels, resorts, campgrounds, and restaurants welcome families by providing special rates, childcare arrangements, playground or sports equipment, and supervised activities for different age groups. Are there activities for younger children? Is there access to swimming, sailing, tennis, horseback riding, miniature golf, bicycling, or other sports that older children will enjoy? Are there activities for older adults as well?
- *Try to choose accommodations with kitchen facilities and room to spread out.* A fussy baby or moody teenager is a lot easier to live with when there is space for everyone. Some hotel suites have separate sleeping quarters, allowing adults to stay up later than children. Consider renting a house or condo, such as those available through Vacation Rentals By Owner (<http://www.vrbo.com>), Airbnb (<http://www.airbnb.com>), or similar sites. This will also allow you to do more meals at home, keeping costs down and limiting time waiting for tables at busy restaurants. If this isn't possible, then think about a hotel room with a suite and refrigerator. Pick up essentials for breakfast and light dinners in the room, and eat out for lunch instead (which can be less expensive than a supper).

- *Plan around the needs and energy levels of both children and older adults.* That way, children won't become cranky or overtired on the trip. Older members of the group may also need to watch their energy level. Whether you are considering sightseeing, a beach trip, or a visit to the zoo, start with the needs of the youngest child and oldest traveller and work from there. How far can your toddler or grandparent walk? How much time in a museum can your older child take? Will food be available if someone gets hungry (or can you bring food with you)? Will a wheelchair be available if an older member of the group becomes fatigued? Will an older person be able to hear and understand the tour guide?
- *Consider how you will get from place to place once you are there.* Will you be able to drive to every place you go? If so, where will you park? Will you need public transportation? Will that work with a stroller? Will the subway or other public transportation be practical for your group?
- *Balance new activities with downtime.* Children generally need vacations that balance opportunities to try to new activities with downtime that lets them relax and think or talk about what they've experienced. If they have too few new activities, they may get bored, but if they have too many, they may feel overwhelmed. Consider balancing a busy morning of sightseeing or active sports with more relaxing pursuits in the afternoon. Or, have a long lunch break -- an hour or two -- that will give children a chance to relax between activities. Schedule days with less activity to allow your child to refuel before another hectic day.
- *Look into a volunteer vacation or ecotrip.* Volunteer vacations let you spend all or part of your trip helping other people or working for a cause such as the environment, and they can be a great way to bring people of different ages together. To find out what's available, search online for "volunteer vacations." You may learn about other organizations that sponsor service trips or opportunities from religious or charitable groups in your community. You might also be able to extend your trip a few days to do some local sightseeing after the volunteer time.
- *Try to anticipate your child's daily needs and routines.* Does your toddler need a late morning nap? Will that special bedtime blanket and cuddly toy help your child fall asleep more easily in the hotel? How will you keep mealtimes and bedtimes on schedule? Does your child become cranky if she does not eat at certain times? If you bring your own pillows, bring colourful pillowcases to avoid confusion with the hotel pillows.
- *Confirm your reservations.* Before you leave home, call the places where you'll be staying and double-check on any reservations that you made, whether you made them by phone or online. Confirm any requests you've made, for instance, non-smoking rooms, wheelchairs, extra beds, car seats and a GPS for rental cars, and other equipment.
- *Consider two-way radios if you have a large group.* Many national parks and rural areas have limited cell phone service. Bringing walkie-talkies or two-way radios will help you to stay in touch if groups head off in different directions or are travelling in multiple cars.
- *Check the weather forecast for your destination.* Major newspapers and websites such as The Weather Channel (<http://www.weather.com>) or The Weather Network

(<http://www.theweathernetwork.com>) carry national and worldwide forecasts. Double-check that you have appropriate clothing and accessories for everyone. Prepare for cold and rainy weather, even if this is not the usual climate where you are going. Bring raincoats or ponchos as well as swimsuits. Layering clothing allows you to stay warm in the early morning and evening and to remain comfortable in the heat of the day. Be sure to bring shoes that are broken in, not new, for long days of walking.

- *Make lists and write down instructions to help you stay organized.* Make a list of what to pack. Leave instructions for your house or apartment sitter and your pet sitter if you have one. Leave instructions with a trusted neighbour, friend, or relative about what to do in an emergency and how to get in touch with you. Make a copy (front and back) of everything in your wallet, including your driver's license and credit cards. Leave the copies with a trusted friend or family member back home in the event that your wallet is stolen. If you are travelling out of the country, lock your passports in the hotel safe and carry copies with you. Consider scanning a copy of each traveller's passport and visa (if necessary) and storing them online (such as attached to an email draft at a webmail account) so that you can easily access a copy in the event of an emergency.
- *If driving, make sure that you have two copies of your car key.* This helps in case one is lost or the key is accidentally locked inside the car.
- *Keep cash and credit cards in several places in your clothing when out in crowded places.* In the event of theft, you are less likely to lose everything you brought with you. Also, consider a portable small safe that you can lock in your room with extra credit cards, passports, and other valuables.

Making airfare arrangements

- *Find out in advance about food service for your flights.* If meals will be served, request special meals, including children's meals, if necessary. When you confirm your flight, also confirm these arrangements. If meals won't be served, bring healthy snacks to eat. Remember: you cannot bring bottles of water through security at the airport, but you can bring an empty bottle and refill it from an airport water fountain.
- *Ask for bulkhead seats.* This row doesn't have seats in front of it so there's room to move around and to stretch. Again, these seats should be confirmed when you check your flight status. Other seats with extra room, available on some flights, are the emergency rows, available only for adults who can assist in the event of an emergency onboard.
- *If travelling with small children or adults with accessibility issues,* check with the airline about pre-boarding. Be sure to notify the airline if you will need wheelchair accommodations while in the airport or between flights. Most airlines will allow you to check a stroller at the gate.
- *Check your flight status before leaving.* A quick phone call or check of the airline's website to confirm the plane's departure time may save you hours of waiting at the airport. Many airlines also provide the option of signing up for email or text message alerts about your

flight's departure status. Arrive early enough to allow adequate time to go through security. If possible, check in online from home and print boarding passes. Or, if you have a smartphone, install the airline's app and check in using it. These options lessen the time spent waiting in lines. You may be able to get additional information from flight-tracking websites, such as FlightStats (<http://www.flightstats.com>) and FlightView (<http://www.flightview.com>).

- *Take your car seat or booster seat.* If flying with younger children, check with the airline to see if children may ride in their car seat on the plane. This keeps them safer, and it may help them adjust to the flight. If you have an infant who does not require a ticket, ask the airline if there is an empty seat you may use. This provides a safer ride for your infant.
- *Know what you can and can't take on board.* Visit Transport Canada's website (<http://www.tc.gc.ca>) and search under "I am an air passenger" to learn about safety rules and what's allowed on a plane and what's not. Make sure you also familiarize yourself with the airline's carry-on limits as well as any weight limits or fees for checked luggage.
- *Pack some light, healthy food in your carry-on bag in case of delays.* If travelling with a baby, be sure to bring infant formula as well as several bottles. If you are breastfeeding, bring extra liquids for yourself.
- *Pack all essentials in a carry-on bag as well.* Pack prescription and non-prescription medications (in their original bottles) and essentials for children, such as diapers and an extra change of clothes (including underwear). That way you'll have what you need should any checked luggage get lost or delayed.
- *Make sure that all luggage is well marked.* Label bags both inside and out in the event that luggage tags detach from suitcases. Put a copy of your itinerary in each suitcase, as this will help your luggage make it to your destination in case of such damage.

Packing essentials

- *Pack a first-aid kit with adhesive bandages, pain and fever reducers, antiseptic, and medications that family members need.* This should include prescription and non-prescription medications. Pack more medications than you expect to need, in case some are lost or the trip is prolonged. Be sure to travel with your health insurance information, including contact phone numbers in case pre-certification is needed for emergency care. If you wear eyeglasses, pack an extra pair, as well as your prescription. If you wear contact lenses, be sure to pack any storage cases and fluids you will need (keeping bottle sizes within the required Transport Canada limit) and your backup glasses.
- *Pack with everyone's needs in mind.* Will your toddler need equipment such as a crib, highchair, baby seat, or bike helmet? Do you need swim flotation aids? Will your teenager need to bring protective gear, such as a bike helmet or knee pads? Will an older relative need to bring a cane or special shoes?

- *Pack premoistened wipes.* They are great for all kinds of cleanups.
- *Bring a backpack to hold essentials for day trips.* You may want to pack rain gear, food and water, a camera, maps, and more. Consider using a backpack as a diaper bag, which will free your hands so you can hold onto children in crowds.
- *Pack a road atlas, maps, and guidebooks.* Or plan on using the GPS from your car or smartphone. Check with your mobile phone carrier for any extra voice or data charges at your destination.
- *Pack a bag of surprises for your children* -- small games, puzzles, books, and other things to bring out during the trip. Bring these out on different days to make your trip more fun and to get through the "mid-vacation" lull.

Safety tips when planning ahead

Here are some safety tips as you plan for your trip:

- *Stop your newspaper delivery and file a request to the post office to hold your mail, particularly if you're planning a lengthy vacation.* Newspapers or mail piling up could alert potential thieves that you are away.
- *Do not share your vacation plans on social networking sites such as Facebook, and make sure your children do not either.* There have been cases of burglaries committed by people who learned of vacation plans on social networking sites. Share your photos and trip details once you return.
- *Safeguard your home.* Make sure to lock all doors and windows. Turn off the water at the main so that the house will not flood if a pipe or washing machine hose bursts. If you are leaving in cold weather for more than a day or two, turn the thermostat down to save on heating costs. Turn down your water heater also. Consider using timers to have lights on in different rooms at various times. If possible -- and in order to ensure you respect the conditions of a home insurance policy -- have someone check your home every few days. Consider leaving a car in your driveway so that it appears that someone is home.
- *Put identification for each child, including contact information for where you are staying, in the shoe of each older child or on the inside of the shirt for younger children.* If you carry a mobile phone and keep it turned on, include your phone number in the contact information. Never display a child's name on his or her clothing or backpack. Most hotels have business cards in the lobby, so you can easily pick one up each day for your child to keep on hand.
- *Review safety instructions with children daily before and while you are travelling.* If lost, a child should find someone who works in the place you are visiting (employees will usually be wearing a nametag) or a mother with children. Children should be told that if they are lost, they should stay where they are (as much as possible) and you will come to them. Tell children that they should never go in a car with anyone.

- *Make sure all adults carry information about local accommodations with them.* Be sure that each adult has enough cash for cab fare back to the hotel in the event that you become separated.
- *If you will be travelling by car, make sure to perform necessary and routine maintenance on your car prior to departure.*
- *Check on the status of auto club memberships so that you're prepared in the event of an emergency.* Do this before you leave.
- *If renting a car, check your auto insurance policy for coverage of accidents.* Ask about nonsmoking cars as well as availability of car seats and GPS equipment.
- *Consider programming emergency numbers into your mobile phone before the trip.*

Staying within your budget

Here are some tips to help keep down costs of your trip:

- *Look for discounts.* You may qualify for discounts if you are travelling with older relatives or children or at off-peak times or if you belong to clubs or groups. Ask about these when you make your reservation. In many larger cities, you can find discount passes, such as those found at CityPASS (<http://www.citypass.com>), which offer discounts when you visit multiple attractions. Sites such as Groupon.com (<http://www.groupon.com>) offer daily email deals for various destinations. In the weeks leading up to your trip, you might consider signing up to receive daily emails for deals in your destination city. Search for other discounts and offers online. Some hotels offer discounts to CAA members.
- *Stop at tourist information centres.* Many offer discount coupons.
- *Consider renting a house, a cottage, or a condo.* Sharing a rental with relatives or friends may cost less than a hotel and can be lots of fun.
- *If you are a single parent, travel with another single-parent family.* It's a way to keep expenses down, and it can be fun for adults and children.
- *Try camping.* It's a good way to save money and enjoy the outdoors. Many outdoor equipment stores rent tents and gear. Or borrow from a friend.
- *If you need to do laundry while travelling, take a small amount of laundry detergent with you.* Ask about nearby Laundromats.
- *Stay with friends or family to help keep costs down.* Talk about expectations in advance to avoid misunderstandings. Set a clear departure date that is acceptable to everyone. Be clear about expenses for food and other vacation expenses. Talk about bedtime, TV, computer, videogame, and quiet-time guidelines.

- *If you need a stroller or backpack, decide whether to rent one or bring your own.* Stroller rental for more than a day or two might equal the cost of buying an inexpensive umbrella stroller.
- *Make lunch your big meal of the day.* Children may have more tolerance for table service earlier in the day. "Early-bird specials" are also a good way to save money, and often they're not just for seniors.
- *Consider bringing along a cooler or buying one at your destination.* You can purchase an inexpensive cooler at a discount store. Buy fruit, fresh vegetables, milk, and sandwich fixings, and take picnic lunches or eat in the room.

Travelling by car

- *Keep a small bag of essentials in the front seat.* This way you won't have to stop the car and search in the trunk for what you need.
- *Pack special toys and games and keep these within easy reach.* Bring along magnetic board games. Chess, checkers, Chinese checkers, and backgammon are some of the classics that are fun to play in the car.
- *Take frequent breaks.*
- *Bring trash bags and ask that everyone use them.*
- *Make photocopies of a map and have your children colour in provinces or states they see on license plates.* Have your children track the distances you travel on their maps.
- *Bring a preloaded eReader or bring audio books for a CD player.* Recorded books will help pass the time for all family members.
- *Play car games.* You might want to make a list of things your child can look out for during the trip, such as a particular animal, vehicle, or type of road sign. You'll find some simple descriptions of good car games at the Activities for Kids website (<http://www.activitiesforkids.com/car-games>).
- *For really long trips, you might rent or buy a portable DVD or Blu-ray player so your children can watch movies in the car.* Bring headphones for the children. Recharge battery-powered devices such as iPods before you travel.
- *Give each child a journal.* A spiral-bound notebook can become a travel journal. Encourage your children to draw pictures or write about what they see and do each day.

Having fun as a family

- *Be prepared to deal with delays and disappointments with a sense of humour and a positive attitude.* Children take their "mood cues" from the adults around them.

- *Build in time for rest and relaxation.* A day at a theme park is exhausting for all, and having a day to catch up may help prevent meltdowns for everyone.
- *Be spontaneous.* Spur-of-the-moment activities are often the most fun.
- *Give each child an allowance or budgeted amount of money to use for snacks and souvenirs.* For teens, consider a shopping allowance for clothes or for gifts for friends.
- *Remember that you don't all have to do the same thing at the same time.* The best vacations balance time together and time alone. One adult might take a child on an excursion for a few hours, for instance, while the other adults relax and read. Older children might do something on their own.
- *Take pictures, but don't let the camera take over the vacation.* Building memories that are spontaneous, even without photos or videos, is as important as taking pictures. What's important is to be present and enjoy your fun time together.

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