Surviving and Enjoying the Family Vacation

Ah, the time-honored family vacation. What’s your favorite childhood memory? Does it bring back sweet remembrances from simple days gone by? Or, perhaps your own personal version of National Lampoon’s Vacation?

Great Circle has two words of advice for parents readying the kids and the Family Truckster: Fear not. There are many ways to create positive vacation memories that can last a lifetime and strengthen your own family dynamic.

Read on >
For well-intentioned parents who focus on the logistics – booking the hotel or camping spot, readying the car for your own Walley World excursion, don’t overlook the most important preparation. That’s creating an intentional game plan to address the anxious feelings or overstimulation that come with family trips. Says Lynn Van Dolah, co-coordinator for a Great Circle parenting program, “A little planning that incorporates flexibility and the child’s point of view can help make your family vacation something everyone will remember fondly for years to come.”

**5 Hot Tips for a Cool Family Vacation**

1. **What’s the new “routine”?** Routine is important for all ages, but more so for children, especially those with special challenges or needs. Different bedtimes, naptimes and mealtimes during vacation can lead to meltdowns... for everyone. Van Dolah suggests keeping as much of the normal routine as possible, and discussing what will be different. Letting “the kids chime in” on setting vacation routines helps them feel more in control of their environment,” she adds. Plus, kids buy in more to the trip “when they’re involved in planning where you’ll go and what you’ll see.”

2. **Plan smartly around predictable issues.** Soft earplugs can help a family member who can’t get to sleep with unfamiliar sounds or too much stimulation. Consider booking your hotel room away from the lobby, elevator, swimming pool or restaurants. Familiar objects, such as a blanket or stuffed animal, also provide comfort and continuity, reminds Van Dolah. She recommends reducing the stress of packing by organizing each person’s clothing by days – shirt, pants/skirt, underwear and socks – in separate Ziploc bags. “And make sure all clothing is comfortable if you’re traveling by car.”

3. **“Educational” and “fun” really can go together.** Travel brings the chance to blend history and local culture into the conversation, but don’t make it like social studies class. “This helps kids learn where important sites are in relation to each other, and gives them an awareness of distance and time,” Van Dolah says. Travel games are a must for the car or plane, and small toys can help burn off excess energy during rest stops. “It’s also a good opportunity for adults to relax and unwind.” She recommends teaching kids how to keep a trip journal: “They’ll enjoy bonding over it, sharing with friends and reliving fond memories later.” Don’t forget a goodie bag with healthy snacks or inexpensive treats that the kids can choose from at different times/distances along the way.

4. **Plan for the meltdown.** Before hitting the road, discuss behavioral expectations as a family. “Explain what’s appropriate in public places, such as hotels and restaurants, and then reward children for their cooperation,” Van Dolah says. As important, adults should all be “on the same page” with discipline or responses to behavior, and practice de-escalation. “Yelling only makes backseat arguments worse,” she adds. “Be alert to tension or impending meltdowns and employ alternative strategies,” such as an extra pit stop or an impromptu game of I Spy.

5. **Relax, parents!** If the kids are overstimulated or tired, don’t feel bad about cutting the day’s activities short. “Don’t expect a ‘perfect’ vacation,” says Van Dolah. “Maybe the car trip takes six hours instead of five. Maybe the water park isn’t as much fun because it was a cloudy day. Focus on the time spent together and doing something out of the ordinary – that’s the memories everyone wants from vacation.”

Children’s responses to situations are often influenced by the behaviors of adults around them. So, Van Dolah encourages parents to periodically assess their own emotions and actions during vacation. “And if you’d like some extra support, Great Circle offers a variety of programs and training that equip parents with the tools they need to be successful both on vacation and at home.” Visit [www.greatcircle.org/parentingsupport](http://www.greatcircle.org/parentingsupport) to learn more.

*Great Circle provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services for children, adults and families facing personal challenges or difficult circumstances. For more information about Great Circle’s parenting support programs that help strengthen children and families, visit [greatcircle.org](http://greatcircle.org).*

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