

Child psychologist offers holiday tips for unruly kids

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The holiday season can be particularly over-stimulating for young children, what with more pressure-packed traveling, shopping and even church-going. Boston University child psychologist Dr. Jonathan Comer offers parents these helpful tips on handling those unwanted tantrums and meltdowns by their kids—or by someone else's.

- **Plan ahead**—Try to travel during non-[sleep/nap](#) hours when your [child](#) may be at their best. Identify a few specific behaviors that are often challenging for your child while traveling and talk to them about these before you leave. Clarify the [behavior](#) you would like to see. Think of a "positive opposite" of the behavior you do not like. For example, "Please hold my hand while we walk through the airport," rather than "Don't run away from me."
- **Extra Positive Attention**—Provide extra attention for positive behaviors, such as sharing, listening, and following directions. For example, you might say, "Thanks for holding my hand while in the airport" before your child has a chance to let go and run away. Or perhaps, "Great job following directions like I said!" or "Thank you for sitting quietly on the seat – that makes traveling a lot easier and a lot more fun for all of us."
- **Offer Rewards** – Prior to traveling, identify a reasonable reward the child can earn for following the rules of traveling and immediately follow through with giving the agreed-upon [reward](#) after the child engages in the behaviors you would like to see.
- **Provide Distractions** – Find several different, engaging, and fun (and, if possible, new) toys or activities for your child to play

with while traveling. Reveal the new toys only upon arrival on the [airplane](#) or beginning of the car ride to increase the novelty of the item.

- **Effective communication**—Use a calm, neutral tone of voice when speaking with your child and giving directions. Avoid giving a lot of positive or negative attention to a child's acting-out behavior, and give a clear directive of what behavior you would like to see instead. Often children are more likely to comply if the behavior requested is paired with a positive consequence. For example, "If you continue holding my hand, remember then you will earn an extra piece of candy when we land in Florida."
- **Find a time-out space**—If your child is having difficulty calming down, try to find a separate space to sit quietly with your child. Bathrooms, especially family bathrooms, are a great space. If you typically would ignore acting-out behavior, a bathroom will allow the privacy to engage in "active ignoring" until the behavior subsides, and give you the chance to praise your child when engaging in more calm and appropriate behavior.

What to do if, during your travel/shopping/worshipping, someone else's child is having a tantrum?

- Avoid making comments under your breath or indirectly to the parent or child. Often times, the parent is already feeling anxious about their child's behavior and this may only increase the level of stress the parent and child are experiencing – which can exacerbate the child's tantrum.
- Offer a helping hand. Ask the parent if you can help in any way, perhaps getting an extra toy from the bag or providing a new magazine for the child to browse through.
- Be patient. Traveling for adults is stressful, too. By using your adult patience and calm attitude to provide modeling of

appropriate coping with stress, you are giving a good example to the parent and their child of how to remain calm. Take some deep breaths and if necessary, use any relaxation or imagery exercises that help calm you in other situations.

- Invest in good earphones and activities. Keep yourself busy and entertained while traveling, which will make the time go by faster and will drown out the sounds of the child having the tantrum. You may not be able to exert control over your travel environment, but to whatever extent possible you may be able to distract yourself rather than focusing on the wild child or the parent in distress.
- Be polite. If the behavior is no longer manageable, you can also speak directly to the parent or the flight attendant about trying to change the child's behavior. For example, if the child is kicking your chair, be polite in asking the parent to have their child change their behavior.
- But be careful. Telling a parent they are not handling a situation with their child correctly rarely goes over well. Some kids get worse when they are yelled at, as negative reactions from [parents](#) can be rewarding to some kids. Therefore, just because a parent is not yelling at the child the way you feel he or she should, it is possible that parent knows that will only make the child's behavior worse.

Provided by Boston University

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