

Lazy (or crazy?) days of summer

Summer....just the word conjures up relaxation, a day at the beach or downtime with the family. Any parent will tell you, though, that summer with babies and toddlers can be anything but a day at the beach! The very activities that adults crave --- a change of routine, an escape from the everyday-- can disrupt the lives of little ones in ways we don't often think about. Luckily, with a little advance planning, these transitions can be made smoother for all involved.

A parent's view

Since many of us plan our vacations for months, our expectations often run quite high. The reality of traveling with young children is usually more complicated. Many parents have told me that when they finish packing just the baby's things, there's barely room left in the car for anything else! In part, this is due to the hope that if baby is surrounded with her usual "stuff", things might go more smoothly. Another is our reliance on various forms of baby products to contain or entertain baby, which is very typical in American families. A third factor in our time-starved culture is to attempt to fit every conceivable activity into a week or two's time.

A child's view

Feeding, sleep and play routines are the anchors that infants and toddlers use to define their day. In the first few years, it's all about familiarity sprinkled with some novelty. The challenge with vacations is the balance can be flipped around (there is more "new" than familiar) and this can be unsettling to a baby who is used to certain sleep or feeding routines. Morning naps may now occur in a pack-and-play rather than a crib. Meals may take place outside at a picnic table rather than with baby in a highchair or booster seat. These can be wonderful ways to expand baby's world, but can also overwhelm her.

Additionally, it's not just the environment around baby that may change during vacation time -- the people who care for baby may shift. So, while it's great that mom or dad may be around more during baby's day, it can throw off her sense of how her world operates. Baby thinks, "How come dad is giving me my bath? That's mom's job." Perhaps an older brother is now home from preschool and taking up more of the parent's attention than usual. Baby's behavior can become clingy, as if to say, "Hey, what happened here? I thought I was the center of attention."

How can travel be less stressful?

Experienced families will tell you that the more they travel with their little ones, the less they bring. Certain essentials, like car seats, are non-negotiable. However, parents should think about how they can simplify. Now is the time to use umbrella strollers, for instance, rather than the baby-limo ver-

sion. A recent development has been the proliferation of businesses that rent baby gear at your travel destination. It costs more but for many families, especially those with multiple children, the convenience may be worth the trade-off.

Another strategy that on-the-go families can use is to purchase disposable products. For example, infant or toddler feeding items that are pre-packaged into single servings or inexpensive sippy cups that can double as sandcastle toys come in particularly handy on family vacations. Disposable bibs can keep laundry down, while disposable placemats with cute visuals make eating out more sanitary and fun for baby. Instead of bringing along the entire toy box, parents should consider packing just a few basics (a favorite book, blocks, or a doll or stuffed animal) your little one would enjoy over and over. The fact is that baby will probably be more interested in all the fun things going on around her than in sitting down to play. And odds are you'll want space in your suitcase for a few souvenirs on the return trip home.

Finally, consider what this family vacation is about. When you look back on it, will your memories be about how much you did or about spending time together away from day-to-day pressures? While most parents would say the latter, often their vacation planning looks more like another to-do list. Especially in the younger years, it's important to realize that your child is not going to remember going to a particular zoo or carnival, but she will remember the "feel" of the trip. During the trip itself, she'll feed off your moods. If her parents are stressed out, she'll pick up on it and her behavior is likely to deteriorate. In contrast, if she is surrounded by a sense of relaxation and cuddling and fun, she'll be less cranky about the disruption to her daily routine and more curious about the new people and places in her environment. Vacationing with kids really should be another example of when less can be more. So relax, and enjoy!

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