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Tips can help reduce stress when traveling with children

EAGLE RIVER, Wis.—After hours of frazzled car travel, missed meals and naps, and frequent potty breaks, a car trip might seem more like a mistake you don't want to repeat.

Vacations with children don't have to be completely stress-free to be enjoyable, says Joan LeFebvre, University of Wisconsin-Extension family living educator serving Vilas, Forest and Florence counties. And by planning ahead, you can often make traveling a fun experience for both yourself and your children.

LeFebvre says children handle the schedule changes of travel better when they know what to expect. Explain ahead of time what day and time you are leaving, how you will travel, how long you will stay, and what you will do while traveling. Talk about the people and places you will visit. You can order brochures and maps of your destination, or even make a colorful map with your children that you can take with you to mark where you go each day.

Traveling can be part of the fun of a vacation, if you come prepared. LeFebvre recommends packing a travel bag for children with favorites such as crayons, storybooks and drawing paper. However, add a few new things, or even wrap them up to be distributed at different stages in the trip. Stickers, markers, and small travel games can add excitement to the trip.

Children travel best when their stomachs are full and their bladders are empty, says LeFebvre. Start each day with a good breakfast, and plan nutritious snack breaks at least twice a day. Schedule naptime if you possibly can, whether in the car or at your destination.

If you travel by car, LeFebvre says to expect a longer trip when children come along. Plan rest stops at least every two hours so your child can stretch and burn off energy. Make these stops part of your vacation fun: toss a frisbee, play catch with a beach ball, jump rope or blow bubbles. Have a picnic snack under a tree.

Before beginning a trip, decide where each person will sit. Keep the car doors locked and hands away from windows. Children should be secured in a rear-facing infant or convertible seat with internal harness until they are at least one year old and 20 pounds. Toddlers 20 to 40 pounds should be secured in a convertible seat, in the forward-facing position, or a high

back booster seat with an internal harness. Children weighing 40 to 80 pounds (and under 4 ft. 9 inches tall) are to be secured in a belt-positioning booster seat.

For plane trips, explain ahead of time what procedures are necessary: boarding the plane, finding your seats, storing your carry-on luggage. For example, you can say, 'First we need to find our seats and listen to the flight attendant. Then, we can open up your travel bag and color.'

Bringing gum or hard candy to suck on can help children adjust to pressure changes in a plane. Babies can nurse or suck on a pacifier during take-offs and landings.

Try to keep a positive attitude and to laugh at the little things, says LeFebvre. Keeping children quiet and well-behaved at all times when your family is far from home and has changed all its routines probably isn't realistic. If you realize ahead of time that children may be cranky and charged up by all the changes, you won't be as upset when things come up.

LeFebvre also says to be prepared for a day or two of frustrated children when you arrive home. Settling back into routines after a vacation can be difficult for both parents and children. Give your family at least a day of unpacking and resting before re-entering everyday life.

For more information on parenting issues, contact your county UW-Extension office.

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