



Children Traveling Alone

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Background

The number of children between the ages of 5 and 12 traveling alone, particularly by air, has risen steadily over the years. Estimates for how many children travel alone by plane in the United States per year run as high as 7 million. Children traveling alone, known in the travel industry as "unaccompanied minors," raise a number of issues, the most important being liability and safety. In most cases, solo child travelers neither create nor encounter difficulties. Even the best-planned trip, however, can go wrong, and when unaccompanied children are involved the issues can be particularly problematic.

Many air travelers, for example, have had the frustrating experience of finding out that their luggage was accidentally placed on the wrong plane, and they may have to spend hours or even days tracking it down. But in August 2001, two girls ages 11 and 8 wound up in Toronto instead of San Diego because airline personnel placed them on the wrong connecting flight in Phoenix. While many airlines have strict rules about allowing unaccompanied children to transfer to connecting flights, others do not. (The airline that placed the two girls on the wrong plane quickly revised its policy.)

There are no official guidelines regarding the transport of unaccompanied children. Train and bus regulations are more strict than air regulations, but in all cases it is the transportation providers' obligation to set the requirements. Neither the Air Transport Association nor the International Air Transport Association provides detailed guidelines or even statistics on the number of children traveling alone. The American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA) does note in its "Traveler's Bill of Rights" that unaccompanied children have a right to "timely and courteous assistance" and that they should "never be abandoned or put in fear of being abandoned."

These omissions do not mean that the government is unconcerned about unaccompanied children. The self-imposed industry requirements that must be met are considered stringent enough. With the rise in concern for travel safety in general since the fall of 2001, the government has taken a more active role. Still, airlines, trains, and bus lines are all still allowed to set their own rules for children traveling alone.

The necessary precaution for sending children on trips unaccompanied is that those making the travel arrangements should get as much information before the trip as possible about travel policies and procedures for children. Because rules are subject to change and in order to avoid potential difficulties, it is important to check each time a child travels.

Why Children Travel Alone

The most common reason children travel alone is to visit relatives. As families spread out it is more likely that grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins may live across the country or overseas. Children whose parents are divorced also travel alone. In years past, divorced couples with children would tend to stay in the same geographic location to be able to spend time with those children. Today, job opportunities or remarriage may mean that a child's mother and father may live on opposite coasts.

Clearly, some children are more comfortable traveling than others. A child who flies several times a year will likely be more comfortable on a plane than one who has never flown alone. That is not a given, however. Just as some frequent passengers never get over their fear of flying, neither do some children. A 6-year-old who has never flown before may find the experience one big enjoyable adventure. An 11-year-old who dislikes plane travel, on the other hand, might actually be a difficult and demanding passenger.

Since the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001, airline, train, and bus security have all increased. While this may not affect children as directly as it affects adults, the travel process is longer and involves a considerable amount more time standing in line and waiting. Not only that, children who are old enough to understand what happened in the plane attacks may be frightened of flying even if they were never afraid in the past.

Relatively few unaccompanied children travel by train or bus, in part, because train and bus trips may be too long for children. Also, railroad and bus companies have stricter regulations about who is old enough to travel solo.

Train and Bus Travel

Amtrak estimates that no more than 5,100 children per year travel unaccompanied on its trains. Greyhound estimates far fewer unaccompanied children on its bus routes. In part this low number reflects the fact that most long-distance travel is done by plane, but it also has to do with strict train and bus regulations.

Amtrak will not allow children under the age of 8 to travel unaccompanied, subject to the following restrictions:

- All trips must be scheduled for daylight hours
- Unaccompanied children cannot transfer to another train or to a bus
- Children must depart from and arrive at fully staffed stations; an Amtrak stop with only a ticketing machine is off limits
- Whoever takes the child to the train must fill out a form authorizing Amtrak to let the child travel alone
- The Amtrak agent who makes the arrangements must ask the child who is meeting him or her
- Children traveling unaccompanied pay the full adult fare

Greyhound's requirements are similar, with the following additional restrictions:

- The child's trip cannot be for more than 250 miles
- The child must sit in the first two rows of the bus and must get the driver's permission to get off the bus at rest stops

Air Travel

Travel by air presents a number of challenges where unaccompanied children are concerned. One reason is that so many more children travel solo by plane than by any other means. Another is that, while there are age guidelines and restrictions, maturity levels can differ dramatically among children. It is not just whether a child likes to fly. Some children are fearful of not being with their parents. Others may not want to travel to the place where they happen to be going. The Independent Traveler, Inc., an organization that provides travel advice, reported on its website the case of an 11-year-old boy whose father saw him board the plane that was to take him to his grandparents' home. After the father left, the boy got off the plane, left the airport, and walked 30 miles back to his house. Clearly he did not want to take this trip. Yet his behavior is surprising in view of his age.

Airline Regulations

No airline will allow a child under the age of 5 to travel alone, although some will allow a child under 5 to travel with a companion as young as 12. Most airlines will not allow a child under the age of 8 to take a flight that requires changing planes to make a connection. Any child under 12 who has to make a connecting flight will be escorted by an employee of the airline. Southwest Airlines does not allow any child under the age of 12 to take connecting flights. Although children between the ages of 12 and 15 are not automatically escorted, the parent or [GUARDIAN](#) making the travel arrangements can ask the airline to assist the child.

Accompanied minors usually pay half or reduced fare when flying. Unaccompanied minors are required to pay full fare, as well as an additional service fee of between \$30 and \$75 each way (the price is higher when the child has to make a connection). On most airlines, that fee will cover more than one minor traveling within the same party.

Airlines usually require that a parent or guardian fill out a form with all relevant information about the child. While the airline does not generally take actual guardianship of the child during the flight, one of the personnel is generally assigned to look after the child. Solo child travelers usually have to wear a button or badge to make them easy to identify by airline staffers.

Some children are required to take medication. Airline personnel will not dispense medication to the child, but if the child is able to administer his or her own medication, the airline will allow the child to carry that medicine. The form that parents and guardians fill out asks for a list of medications or other medical issues that may be important for staffers to know.

Most airlines will not allow minors to take the last flight of the day. The reason is that, air travel being subject to such unforeseen circumstances as weather, there is always a chance of delay. If a late evening flight is delayed, it means passengers will probably have to wait until the next morning to catch another flight. A stranded child clearly presents more difficulties to the airline than a stranded adult.

Other Air Travel Issues

In the event that a child is stranded at the airport overnight despite everyone's best efforts, different airlines have different procedures, all of which are subject to the approval of the parent or guardian. Usually, the airline will put the child up in a hotel room. An airline staffer may stay in the room with the child or in an adjoining room. Some airlines will post a guard outside the room. In most cases the airline assigns a staffer of the same sex as the child to serve as an escort. Some airlines may turn a stranded child over to a local child welfare agency for the night.

Encyclopedia of Everyday Law: Children Traveling Alone

One of the biggest challenges for those in charge of watching children is keeping those children amused. Doing so is particularly difficult in the case of long flights. Many of the larger airlines have established facilities designed for children at major airports, where children can wait for their connecting flights. These rooms have games and other activities for children. They also will have other children, so that young travelers will feel less lonely.

Under no circumstances will airline personnel turn a child over to a waiting adult without seeing definitive identification and matching that carefully to the information filled out on the pre-departure form.

International Flights

Children traveling alone on international flights face even closer scrutiny, in part because of the fear of child abductions. In fact, children traveling with only one parent are subject to strict regulations to ensure that a parent is not [KIDNAPPING](#) the child from a custodial parent. Any child under the age of 18 who is traveling with one parent to Mexico must show notarized consent from the other parent or a sole CUSTODY DECREE from the accompanying parent. If the other parent is dead, the airline requires the travelers to show a death certificate.

Children need the same documentation, whether passports, visas, or other official paperwork, as adults. It is a good idea to contact the consulate of the country being visited to determine whether there are any special requirements for children traveling alone.

Common Sense

The most important rule for both parents and children to remember is to plan ahead. Parents should explain to children exactly what will be expected of them as solo travelers. They should also let children know that inappropriate behavior by adult passengers (such as unwanted physical contact) should be reported to airline personnel. If the child has traveled alone before on a different airline, it is not a good idea to assume that the current airline has the same policies. Most airlines list their policies clearly and comprehensively on their websites.

Increased concern for flight security has made the travel process slower and more cumbersome. These new procedures should be explained to the child. It should also be made clear that no matter how accommodating airline personnel may be, they have no obligation to children traveling alone before or after a flight.

Checking out the airlines' websites is a good way to become familiar with each carrier's policies on solo child travelers. Groups such as ASTA (<http://www.asta.org>) and the U. S. Department of Transportation (<http://www.usdot.gov>) can provide additional information. The Department of Transportation offers a free publication, *Kids and Teens Traveling Alone*, which can be obtained by writing to 400 Seventh Street SW, Washington, D. C., 20590.

Additional Resources

Fun on the Run: Travel Games and Songs. Cole, Joanna, and Stephanie Calmerson, Morrow Junior Books, 1999.

Trouble-Free Travel with Children: Helpful Hints for Parents on the Go. Lansky, Vicki, Book Peddlers, 1996.

Organizations

Air Transportation Association of America, Inc. (ATA)

1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20004 USA
Phone: (202) 626-4000
URL: <http://www.airline.org>
Primary Contact: Carol Hallett, President and Chief
Executive Officer

American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA)

1101 King Street, Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA
Phone: (703) 739-2782
Fax: (703) 684-8319
URL: <http://www.asta.org>
Primary Contact: Richard M. Copland, President
and Chief Executive Officer

International Air Transport Association (IATA) (Regional Office, United States)

1776 K Street NW
Washington, DC 20006 USA
Phone: (202) 293-9292
Fax: (202) 293-8448
URL: <http://www.iata.org>
Primary Contact: Pierre Jeannot, Director General
and Chief Executive Officer

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

699 Prince Street
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA
Phone: (703) 274-3900
Fax: (703) 274-2200
URL: <http://www.missingkids.com>
Primary Contact: Ernie Allen, President and Chief
Executive Officer

U. S. Department of Transportation, Office of Aviation and International Affairs

400 Seventh Street SW
Washington, DC 20590 USA
Phone: (202) 366-4000 (General Information)
Phone: (202) 366-2220 (Aviation Consumer
Protection Division)
URL: <http://ostpxweb.dot.gov/aviation>
Primary Contact: Read van de Water, Assistant

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Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs

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