

Surviving the toddler years

Tips for getting through a plane trip, a meal out and more

By Lockie Hunter
WNC Parent contributor

You enter the restaurant armed with an arsenal of toys, sippy cups, and coloring books... but will it be enough?

Most parents understand that toddlers are unpredictable in social situations. From airplanes to weddings, toddlers can be surprisingly docile one moment and screaming the next. How do you tackle those tough social scenes? Asheville moms who have survived toddlerhood speak out with inspired suggestions.

Prepping for the event

Sometimes distraction is key, and a bag full of inexpensive items may turn a sour social evening into a grand one.

Asheville mom Hope Butterworth always carries a stash of portable toys to bring out, preferably ones her children don't use often, such as tiny horses, erasers in the shape of animals or books of stickers.

"My kids love the Crayola air-dry clay in little packets," she says. "No mess, and you can make little dice or animals out of it that dry and then play with them."

Paper and pencils are another essential. Butterworth also lets her boys pack their own tiny backpacks prior to a trip. "Just wearing it around makes them feel important and responsible," she said.

Taking to the skies

Flying presents a host of problems,



Though Emma Rennicks makes a lovely flower girl, weddings are often stressful events for parents with toddlers.

including earaches at takeoff and landing, boredom and being confined to a small seat.

For those nursing, sometimes the act itself is magic, soothing even the fussiest child while creating a magical pop for pressurized toddler ears.

Having family overseas impelled local

mom Jennifer Rennicks to travel when her daughters were toddlers.

"As parents who took Emma trans-Atlantic for the first time at 3 months, we developed many coping techniques for successful travel with kids," Rennicks notes. "The most important is to nurse for a few years since a hit on the beloved breast could usually fix anything within seconds."

One idea for keeping kids occupied on a flight is to buy a small new toy or book and give to them at some point during the trip. Portable DVD players can serve as a distraction. In a pinch, even a cell phone is entertainment.

Eating out

Butterworth says she feels the best advice is to keep the children fed no matter where you are. Pack cheese sticks or some kind of protein snack so children don't get hungry and melt down. She also cautions against having sweet drinks with dinner.

"My kids could usually handle late nights, subway rides or grown-up parties as long as their blood sugar stayed pretty even," she says.

Butterworth also created "restaurant manners" that her children put on. "Literally, they pretend to stick them on their bodies before we walk into a restaurant."

Asheville's Caroline Kennedy found that when her son, Andy, was young, dinners out often meant that she or her husband would eat fairly quickly and go outside to take Andy for a walk.

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Often a stroll with the child will allow one adult to finish a meal in relative peace.

'I Do' want my kid to behave

If you attend a wedding or event where a toddler need be silent, Butterworth suggests letting the child know all about what is going on beforehand and tell him why everyone is so excited. (Don't forget to tell him about the cake to be had afterward.)

Non-kid-friendly homes

The post-dinner stroll is not limited to restaurants. Sometimes you just have to take children outside and let them run around.

Butterworth recalls taking her 3-year-old to the home of a friend for a grown-up party. "He collected native art so on every surface, just at the kids' level, there were antique hand stitched dolls, and priceless arty toys. In that situation, you just can't win."

Are we there yet?

Kennedy notes that when her son was quite young, he enjoyed listening to stories on CD with headphones.

"Some kids, who are already accustomed to sitting and listening to someone reading, can sit a long time with that type of entertainment," she says.

An array of stories on tape and CDs can be checked out from the library.

One trick that may work in multiple situations where silence is not required is developing a running story starter. Butterworth's starter begins with "Once there was a mouse named Krik-krak who lived in a house with 29 cats..." So when she has to wait and her children are in need of some stimulation, she starts a Krik-krak story that her children help create as they go along.

"He had a rotating group of friends in his mouse hole; once he even went to China," she says. "It was a great distraction, and they loved it."