

When Kids Fly Alone



U.S. Department of Transportation

Aviation Consumer Protection Division

MANY CHILDREN FLY ALONE. There are no Department of Transportation regulations concerning travel by these “unaccompanied minors,” but the airlines have specific procedures to protect the well-being of youngsters flying by themselves. This booklet summarizes some of the most common airline policies. These policies may differ, however, so you should check with the carrier that you plan to use for a description of its rules and services and any additional charges that may apply.

Important: There have been instances of teens buying an airline ticket and flying without their parents' knowledge.

- If your son or daughter has access to a credit card and the Internet, he or she can buy a ticket. Your child can also use cash to buy a ticket at an airport, an airline's city ticket office, or a travel agency.
- As noted below, at age 15 most airlines will allow a child to fly alone on domestic flights without any unaccompanied-minor procedures. Some airlines permit this for kids as young as 12. When a child has reached this minimum age for traveling alone without unaccompanied-minor procedures, the airline does not require evidence of parental permission to travel alone. If the child has a passport, he or she can even travel internationally.
- If you are concerned that your child may attempt to purchase and use an airline ticket without your knowledge, you may wish to monitor his or her activities more closely, consider canceling any credit card to which your child has had access, and learn how to review your credit card accounts online and do so on a regular basis (e.g., weekly or more). Look for any questionable travel-related charges.
- If you believe that your minor child may be traveling without your consent, call your local police.

General Airline Policies

Who can fly alone?

Most U.S. airlines will permit children who have reached their fifth birthday to travel unaccompanied. Kids ages 5 through 11 who are flying alone must usually travel pursuant to special “unaccompanied minor” procedures. On some airlines, these procedures are required for unaccompanied children as old as 14. On many carriers, children 5 through 7 will only be accepted for nonstop flights and for direct or ‘through’ flights. (A direct or ‘through’ flight has one or more stops, but no change of planes.) Kids ages 8 and up can usually take connecting flights as well as direct or ‘through’ flights.

On domestic flights some airlines do not require unaccompanied-minor procedures for children 12 and over (15 and over on some airlines), but will apply those procedures—and charge the appropriate fee if applicable (see “Fees” below)—at the request of the parent or guardian. Children under the age of 5 must always be accompanied by someone at least 12 years of age flying in the same cabin (18 years of age on some airlines); airlines do not allow kids under 5 to fly alone.

Reminder: once your child has reached the age of 12 (or 15 on some airlines), the carrier will consider him or her to be a “young adult” passenger. As noted above, some airlines will apply unaccompanied-minor procedures to children over age 12 (or 15) if you specifically request this and, in most cases, pay the unaccompanied-minor fee. If these arrangements are not made, the carrier will probably expect your child to be responsible for making his or her own alternative plans in the event of a canceled, delayed or diverted flight. You will not necessarily be notified of any such schedule irregularity if unaccompanied-minor procedures are not arranged.

Here are the principal age-based unaccompanied-minor qualifications for most U.S. airlines:

Age	Restrictions	Unaccompanied-Minor Procedures?
Under 5	Cannot travel alone	N/A
5 through 7	Can travel alone on nonstop and through flights	Yes
8 through 11 (8 through 14 on some airlines)	Can usually travel alone on any flight*	Yes
Domestic flights 12 through 17 (15 through 17 on some airlines)	Can travel alone on any flight without restrictions*	Only on request
International flights: 12 through 17 (15 through 17 on some airlines)	Can travel alone on any flight, but many carriers require unaccompanied-minor procedures	Required by many carriers

* Except on small aircraft with no flight attendant. Restrictions on connections in some cases.

Although these are the minimum and maximum ages set by the airlines, you as a parent are in the best position to decide whether your child is ready to travel alone.

Travel Tips for Parents of Unaccompanied Minors

Booking the flights

In order of desirability, you should try to book (1) a nonstop flight, (2) a direct or ‘through’ flight (may have a stop, but no change of planes), (3) an online connection (change of planes on the same airline), or (4) an interline connection (a change of planes from one airline to another). Remember that most airlines will not allow kids under 8 to take connecting flights when traveling alone. If your child’s trip involves more than one airline, call each carrier to find out about its policies and requirements for unaccompanied minors.

Simpler itineraries mean fewer opportunities for flights to be delayed or for other problems to arise. Flights earlier in the day are less susceptible to delays than later flights. Avoid the last flight of the day if possible; if it is canceled, opportunities for rerouting may be limited. Some carriers will not accept a reservation for an unaccompanied minor that involves a connection to the last flight of the day or a connection to/from another airline. Some airlines don’t permit unaccompanied minors to use connections at all.

Most airlines require that a child traveling as an unaccompanied minor have a reservation for all flights; standby travel is generally not permitted. If the flight has meal service, ask about reserving a child’s meal; if available, these have to be arranged in advance.

Ask the airline about “electronic ticketing,” in which no paper ticket is issued (the purchase record is maintained in the computer). This means there will be no ticket to be lost or forgotten during the trip. You might not be able to purchase an unaccompanied-minor ticket on a web site.

When you receive the ticket or itinerary, check to make sure that all dates, times and cities, as well as your child's name, are correct. Note the origin and destination airport; some cities have more than one. Make sure the person meeting your child also knows the airport for the arriving and return flights. Ask the airline what phone number you should call if you have questions about unaccompanied-minor procedures or problems during the trip.

Ask the airline about getting a "gate pass" so that you can accompany your child through security to the departure gate. Some airlines require this. Each adult going to the gate will need a government-issued photo ID. Give this information to the person who will be meeting your child at the destination airport and putting him or her on the return flight.

Preparing for the flights

If your child has not flown before, you may want to visit the airport before departure day to familiarize him or her with the surroundings. Point out places where assistance is available.

Your son or daughter should dress for both the outbound and return flights in comfortable clothes that are easy for him or her to manage in small aircraft lavatories. Put the child's first initial and last name in any article of clothing that might get taken off during the flight (e.g., a sweater or jacket).

Many airlines do not permit their employees to administer medication to passengers. If your child requires medication that he or she cannot take unassisted and which would normally be necessary during the time of the flight, consult your doctor about alternatives.

Airlines try to do everything necessary to make your child's trip safe and comfortable. However, you should understand that unaccompanied-minor services do not include constant supervision or entertainment during the flight.

At the airport

When checking in an unaccompanied minor, airlines generally recommend that you get to the airport at least one or two hours before departure on a domestic flight and two hours or more for an international flight. Check with your airline for its requirement. Allow time for traffic delays and lines at the check-in counter. You may also need time to fill out an unaccompanied-minor form, clear security (there may be a line), and get your child to the gate in time for pre-boarding. Don't plan to simply drop off your child at the airport entrance or the ticket counter. Make sure the person putting your child on the return flight also understands this.

Bring to the airport the address and the home and daytime phone numbers of the person meeting your child; the airline will want that information. The airline wants your phone number and the phone number of the person meeting the flight at the child's destination so that the carrier will be able to provide information in the event of any schedule irregularity that may arise.

Your child may be given a special badge to wear; tell him or her not to take it off until after being met by the person who will be meeting your son or daughter at the destination. **If** there is a paper ticket and the airline does not have its own procedure for handling it, have your child keep the ticket (or a copy of the itinerary) in a pocket or carry-on bag so that it will not inadvertently be left on the airplane. The ticket should never be placed on an adjoining seat or in the seatback pocket.

Have your child use a bathroom in the gate area at some point before boarding. If traveling under unaccompanied-minor procedures, he or she will be escorted onto the airplane during pre-boarding. Airline policies call for a positive hand-off of your child from one employee to the next. At the destination, the person meeting your child may have to show ID (many airlines require photo ID). Even a parent may have to show ID when picking up the child at the end of the trip.

Stay in the gate area until the flight has taken off, in case the aircraft has to return to the gate. Flights are sometimes delayed on the ramp or taxiway after they have left the gate. On most airlines, any gate agent should be able to tell you when the flight has taken off. Arrange your schedule for the departure day so that you can remain at the airport if the flight's departure is delayed.

Proof of age

If your child may appear to be younger (or older) than one of the age cutoffs described above (e.g. if he or she may appear to be under 5, or under 8 for a connecting flight), bring the child's birth certificate to the airport—the airline may ask to see proof of age. Send a copy of the birth certificate to the person who will be bringing your child to the airport for the return flight.

Fees

Most airlines charge a fee for the unaccompanied-minor services discussed in this pamphlet. At the time this pamphlet was issued, most carriers' fees were \$50 to \$100 each way (\$100 to \$200 round trip). These fees are in addition to the air fare. The fee is sometimes higher on international flights. On some carriers a fee might be charged only when the child is taking a connecting flight. If you have two or more children traveling on the same flight to the same destination, most airlines charge only one fee.

International travel

Some airlines automatically apply the unaccompanied-minor procedures to kids through age 17 on international flights, and charge the standard unaccompanied-minor fee if applicable. Children must usually have the same passport, visa or other international entry documentation required of adults. In addition, certain countries require children leaving that country without both parents or a legal guardian to have a letter of consent, in some cases notarized. Check with the embassy or consulate in the U.S. of the destination country for its requirements. Airlines and travel agents are not responsible for ensuring that your child has the required international travel documents, but they sometimes can provide useful information.

What your child should bring

You may want to consider having your child bring a carry-on bag that is small and light enough for him or her to deal with. Some useful things to bring would include:

- Books, small interactive toys (e.g., Etch-a-Sketch), games (without a lot of pieces), coloring books and crayons, sticker books, etc. You may want to pack a surprise or two. Video games should have the volume low or off. If your child brings a personal stereo, please include headphones. Some airlines prohibit the playing of CD's due to potential interference with aircraft systems; check with your carrier. Remote-control toys may be prohibited for the same reason, and due to security considerations toy guns should be left at home. Tell your child that the flight attendant or pilot might make an announcement requesting that all electronic devices be turned off for takeoff and landing and that he or she should do as requested.
- A copy of the child's complete itinerary, including dates, airline name(s), flight numbers, departure and arrival times, and the reservation record locator number. Make sure that he or she is aware that this is in the bag. You and the person meeting the flight should also have a copy of this. Write your home, work and cell phone numbers and the phone numbers of the person meeting the flight on this itinerary. Also include your name and the child's name, in case the carry-on bag is inadvertently left on one of the flights or in an airport.
- You may want to pack a light snack, since flights can be delayed after boarding or take longer than expected. Be alert to security-related limits on the quantity of liquids that can be brought into the cabin (see www.tsa.gov).

- Any essentials that your child will need in the first 24 hours in case his or her checked bag is delayed (e.g., medicine, eyeglasses, a change of underwear).

If the weather is warm and your child is lightly dressed, he or she may want to bring a sweater in the cabin; the aircraft air conditioning may feel chilly.

Your child should have enough cash to buy a meal in case of an unexpected delay. If there is a movie on the flight, there may be a charge for a headset. Some airlines charge for soft drinks during the flight. Your child should also have a cell phone or several quarters in order to make phone calls if it becomes necessary, and he or she should know how to make a collect long-distance call from a pay phone to you or to the person meeting the flight. Some parents of older children give the child a pre-paid phone card and instructions on how to use it.

What your child should know

The most important thing to tell your child is not to leave the airport unaccompanied or with a stranger. Tell the child to go to a uniformed airline employee or airport police officer if he or she needs help. Remind your child of the potential dangers associated with interaction with strangers. Tell your child that if at any point during the flight he or she is made to feel uncomfortable by someone seated nearby, the child should immediately get the attention of the nearest flight attendant and explain his/her concerns.

Tell your child whether the flight will have a stop or if there will be a connection and resulting change of planes before the final destination. Have the person who puts your son or daughter on the return flight give him or her the same information. If the destination city for your child's outbound or return flight has more than one airport, he or she should know the name of the proper airport.

If traveling under the airline's unaccompanied-minor procedures, your child will be escorted off the airplane at the connecting airport (if any) and final destination; tell your son or daughter not to deplane alone. If there is an enroute stop with no change of planes, tell the child not to deplane there unless escorted into the terminal. Unaccompanied minors are escorted by an employee of the airline or its contractor. If you have any questions about escort procedures, contact the airline in advance. If your child has any doubt about whether to get off the airplane at a particular stop, or any other questions or concerns, tell him or her to ask a flight attendant. Also, let your son or daughter know about the flight attendant call button above the seat.

Your child should know that pressure changes during takeoff and descent can make one's ears slightly uncomfortable. To help with this tell the child that he or she can swallow or yawn several times, or chew gum.

If this is your child's first flight, explain that there will be some sounds that might cause some concern but which are routine. This includes the engines throttling up for takeoff, the whine of the control surfaces in the wings moving during the flight, the 'thump' of the landing gear locking into place before landing, and the roar of the thrust reversers just after touchdown. There may also be some patches of bumpy air, but on most flights this does not last long, and it poses no threat to the aircraft even if things start to shake a bit. You should advise your child to keep his or her seatbelt fastened at all times.

Checklist for the person at the child's destination

Picking up the child

- Be accessible by phone on the day of the flight.
- If your community has more than one airport, know which one the child is going to.
- Don't send someone else at the last minute; the airline will only release the child to the person named on the Unaccompanied Minor form.
- Bring government-issued photo ID when picking up the child.
- Bring a copy of the child's itinerary (flight numbers, etc.).
- Flights sometimes arrive early; get to the gate in plenty of time. Check the monitor at the airport—gate assignments often change.
- Airlines typically will give gate passes to clear security to persons meeting unaccompanied minors. (This may require additional time.)
- You may want to call the parent in the origin city after you have picked up the child.

The return flight

- Dress the child comfortably rather than formally.
- Make sure the child's carry-on bag contains a light snack (be alert to security restrictions on liquids), a copy of the itinerary with flight numbers, flight times and ticket/reservation number, the child's name (in case the carry-on bag is lost), phone numbers, essentials such as eyeglasses and medicines (in case the checked bag is delayed), cash for a meal, and quarters for phone calls.
- The child may want to bring a sweater in the cabin; airplanes can get chilly.
- Bring a copy of the child's birth certificate if he or she might appear to be under 5, under 8 for a connecting flight, or over that airline's unaccompanied-minor age limit.
- Remember the ticket if a paper ticket was issued.
- Point out to the child any enroute stops or change of planes during the trip.
- Plan to get to the airport a couple of hours before departure (more than that for an international flight), and to accompany the child to the gate. Adults should have government-issued photo ID.
- Have the child use a bathroom shortly before boarding.
- You should stay at the departure gate until you are reasonably sure that the flight has taken off. Arrange your schedule so that you can remain at the airport if departure is delayed.