

Taking a Road Trip with Your Baby

By Elizabeth Pantley, Author of Gentle Baby Care

To Grandmother's house we go! And you'll be in the car for five whole hours — how can you make the trip enjoyable with a baby along?

Learn about it

There's no question: Marathon car trips with a baby on board take a good amount of planning and organization. But it can be done — and yes, it can even be fun!

Planning the trip

In the hustle that precedes a trip, it can be easy to *let* things happen, instead of *make* things happen. Be proactive in making your trip decisions. Contemplating these questions, and coming up with the right answers, can help make your trip more successful:

- Does your baby sleep well in the car? If yes, plan your travel time to coincide with a nap or bedtime so your baby can sleep through part of the journey. If not, plan to leave immediately after a nap or upon waking in the morning. Don't fool yourself into thinking your baby will behave differently than usual in the car just because it's a special occasion.
- Is it necessary to make the trip all at once, or can you break it up with stops along the way? The longer your baby is strapped in the carseat, the more likely he'll become fussy. Planning a few breaks can keep everyone in a better frame of mind.
- When estimating an arrival time, have you factored in plenty of extra time for unplanned surprises? A diaper explosion that requires a complete change of clothes or a baby whose inconsolable crying requires an unexpected 20-minute stop are just two of the things that can easily happen.
- Do you have everything you need to make the trip pleasant? Items like:
 - Window shades to protect your baby from the sun and create a darker, nap-inducing atmosphere.
 - A cooler for cold drinks; a bottle warmer if needed.
 - Plenty of toys that are new or forgotten favorites saved just for the trip.
 - Baby-friendly music on tape or CD.
 - A rear-view baby mirror to keep an eye on baby (unless a second person will be sitting with your little one)
 - Books to read to your baby.

Preparing the car

Take plenty of time to get the car ready for your trip. If two adults are traveling, consider yourself lucky and arrange for one person to sit in the backseat next to the baby. If you are traveling alone with your little one, you'll need to be more creative in setting up the car, and you'll need to plan for more frequent stops along the way.

Here are a few tips for making the car a traveling entertainment center for your baby:

- Use ribbon or yarn and safety pins or tape to hang an array of lightweight toys from the ceiling of the car to hang over your baby. An alternative is to string a line from one side of the car to the other with an array of toys attached by ribbons. Bring along an assortment of new toys that can be exchanged when you stop the car for a rest. Just be sure to use small toys and keep them out of the driver's line of view.
- Tape brightly colored pictures of toys on the back of the seat that your baby will be facing.
- If no one will be sitting next to your baby and your child is old enough to reach for toys, set up an upside-down box next to the car seat with a shallow box or a tray with ledges on top of it. Fill this with toys that your baby can reach for by himself. You might also shop around for a baby activity center that attaches directly to the car seat.
- If you plan to have someone sitting next to baby, then provide that person with a gigantic box of toys with which to entertain the little one — distraction works wonders to keep a baby happy in the car. One of the best activities for long car rides is book reading. Check your library's early reading section; it typically features a large collection of baby-pleasing titles in paperback that are easier to tote along than board books.
- Bring along an assortment of snacks and drinks for your older baby who's regularly eating solids, and remember to bring food for yourself, too. Even if you plan to stop for meals, you may decide to drive on through if your baby is sleeping or content — saving the stops for fussy times.
- Bring books on tape or quiet music for the adults for times when your baby is sleeping. The voice on tape may help keep your baby relaxed, and it will be something you can enjoy.
- If you'll be traveling in the dark, bring along a battery-operated nightlight or flashlight.

Car travel checklist

- ❑ Well-stocked diaper bag
- ❑ Baby's blanket
- ❑ Carseat pillow or head support
- ❑ Window shades (sun screens)
- ❑ Change of clothes for your baby
- ❑ Enormous box of toys and books
- ❑ Music or books on tape or CDs
- ❑ Baby food, snacks, and drinks for your baby
- ❑ Sipper cups
- ❑ Snacks and drinks for the adults
- ❑ Cooler
- ❑ Wet washcloths in bags, or moist towelettes
- ❑ Empty plastic bags for leftovers and trash
- ❑ Bottle warmer
- ❑ Cell phone
- ❑ Baby's regular sleep music or white noise (if needed, bring extra batteries)
- ❑ First aid kit/prescriptions/medications
- ❑ Jumper cables
- ❑ Money/wallet/purse/ID
- ❑ Medical and insurance information/emergency phone numbers
- ❑ Maps/driving directions
- ❑ Baby carrier/sling/stroller
- ❑ Camera and film
- ❑ Suitcases

During the journey

If you've carefully planned your trip and prepared your vehicle, you've already started out on the right foot. Now keep these things in mind as you make your way down the road:

- Be flexible. When traveling with a baby, even the best-laid plans can be disrupted. Try to stay relaxed, accept changes, and go with the flow.
- Stop when you need to. Trying to push "just a little farther" with a crying baby in the car can be dangerous, as you're distracted and nervous. Take the time to stop and calm your baby.
- Put safety first. Make sure that you keep your baby in his carseat. Many nursing mothers breastfeed their babies during trips. This can be dangerous in a moving car, even if you are both securely belted: You can't foresee an accident, and your body could slam forcefully into your baby. Instead, pull over and nurse your baby while he's still in his carseat. That way, when he falls asleep, you won't wake him up moving him back into his seat.
- Remember: *Never, ever leave your baby alone in the car — not even for a minute.*

On the way home

You may be so relieved that you lived through your trip that you sort of forget the other trip ahead of you: the trip home. You'll need to organize the trip home as well as you did the trip out. A few days in advance, make certain that all your supplies are refilled and ready to go. Think about the best time to leave, and plan accordingly. In addition, think about what you learned on the trip to your destination that might make the trip home even easier. Is there something you wish you would have had but didn't? Something you felt you could have done differently? Did you find yourself saying, "I wish we would have..."? Now's the time to make any adjustments to your original travel plan so that your trip back home is pleasant and relaxed.

This article is an excerpt from *Gentle Baby Care* by Elizabeth Pantley. (McGraw-Hill, 2003)