



Preparing a Child to Fly Alone

Summer vacation means travel—and not just for families. Increasingly, children are flying solo. Whether they're jetting off for one-on-one time with Grandma or shuttling between divorced parents, the prospect of flying alone can be a thrill. But for many parents, having a child travel alone can be worrisome, says Connie Phillip, Aviation Services Airline Manager at Lehigh Valley International Airport.

Fortunately, by planning ahead and taking a few simple precautions, you can ensure your child's journey will be safe and fun. Here are Phillip's tips to help ease concerns and make the trip memorable.

Before the flight:

- **Get the low-down on airline policies.** Most airlines don't allow children under age 5 to fly solo. Ages 5-12 (14 for some airlines) typically require special "unaccompanied minor" (UM) supervision. There's usually an additional fee for this service, ranging from \$25 to \$75 each way above the cost of the ticket.
- **Know what you're paying for.** UM supervision isn't a babysitting service; it's more like an escort service. That means an airline employee will escort your child from the departure gate to the onboard lead flight attendant and make sure she's delivered to the specified adult at the arrival gate. Most major airlines also escort children to connecting flights. Children traveling alone cannot fly standby, and they can be refused transportation if the flight is expected to terminate short of, or bypass, the child's destination due to weather or possible diversions. It is not recommended to book your child's reservation on the last flight of the day. When you book the flight, ask what services are provided and how unusual situations will be handled.



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- **Consider your child's maturity level.** Just because an airline allows 5-year-olds to fly solo, it doesn't mean your child is ready. The same goes for 12- or 14-year-olds. If they feel they need it, parents can request UM service for older children, usually up to age 17. "At the very least, mention at check-in that your child is old enough and is traveling alone, but that you're a little nervous," Phillip says. "Most flight attendants will keep an eye on the children, even if they're not receiving UM service."
- **Arrive early.** On flight day, leave plenty of time (two hours prior to departure) for paperwork at the ticket counter, security-gate check-in and introductions to the employee who will escort your child. "Some parents are running late when they arrive," Phillip says. "You don't want that rushed feeling." To ease stress, request that a UM application be mailed to you or stop by the airport head of time to pick one up. The UM form asks for your regular and emergency contact information and contact information (including address) for the person meeting the child on arrival. Be sure everything is complete and accurate.
- **Don't forget your driver's license.** Without it you may not receive a gate pass to wait with your child at the boarding gate, meaning you'll have to say goodbye at the security checkpoint.
- **Wait to board.** "We usually start boarding 30 minutes before departure, and offer pre-boarding for UMs," Phillip says. "But younger children may have trouble sitting still that long on the plane. You might want to wait until the end to board your child."
- **Stay for take-off.** Just because the plane has left the gate doesn't mean it won't return with a weather, mechanical or air traffic delay or be cancelled. Even with UM supervision, no child likes to feel stranded.



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For the flight:

- **Seat your child strategically.** If he likes a window seat, reserve it beforehand. Some airlines do require UMs be seated in specific seats in the forward cabin or aft cabin, Phillip says.
- **Pack carry-on essentials:**
 - Cell phone with important numbers and emergency contact information
 - The child's photo ID (if he has one) or copy of birth certificate
 - Games, books or toys
 - Snacks
- **Label everything.** "Children often forget items on board," Phillip says. "Label all carry-on bags and attach self-stick address labels on electronic toys or gadgets so we can return them if they're left behind."
- **Review the safety rules.** All the everyday safety rules apply. Phillip also recommends describing the trip, step-by-step, so your child will know what to expect, and reminding the child to stay with an airline employee at all times. "Your child should talk to the on-board flight attendants if there are any problems," she says. "Airline personnel are happy to help, even kids who aren't UMs."

After landing:

- **Tell your child to stay seated upon arrival and wait for the flight attendant.** "Some children attempt to walk off the plane and we have to go after them," Phillip says.
- **Keep in contact with the pick-up person.** Verify flight information with those meeting your child and suggest they arrive early with their driver's license so they can be admitted to the arrival gate. "Kids are sometimes disappointed when no one is waiting for them," Phillip says.



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