

What All Child Travelers (and Their Parents) Should Know

By MELINDA BLAU

EACH year, thousands of children set out on trips alone, traveling to schools, to camps, to visit grandparents or to spend time with a divorced parent. From as young as 5 years old, they go by bus, by train and — most often — by airplane.

United Airlines and T.W.A. report that flights by unaccompanied children is a growing phenomenon. Because they pay the full adult fare, no exact figures are kept, but the airlines are appealing to that market with special provisions to win parents' trust and score points with young travelers as well. Amtrak also makes special arrangements for train riders under 12.

"They treated me like a movie star," said one 9-year-old traveler after her first solo flight. "I never felt frightened about being alone because everyone kept checking to see if I was O.K."

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"It's a first step toward independence," said Dr. Lee Salk, a child psychologist and the author of "Ask Dr. Salk." "Traveling alone gives children a feeling of accomplishment and mastery."

Dr. Salk cautioned that not all children are ready for the experience, especially children who daydream or are easily distracted, who are accident-prone or who have a tendency to wander off. Age is not necessarily the determining factor. Some 8-year-olds have flown halfway around the world and there are 12-year-olds who can't handle a one-hour trip.

Parents should ask themselves if their child's capabilities are equal to the demands of the trip. They should also ask the child for his feelings. "Discuss whether he or she wants to travel alone," said Dr. Salk, stressing that parents should never force children

into a trip they're not ready to handle. He noted, however, that some degree of anxiety is natural. Children watch television and have heard about crashes and kidnappings. Most children are aware of the same "what-ifs" that plague their parents.

Even a seasoned veteran like 10-year-old Rusty Holzer, who has 10 flights and perhaps 25 train rides under his belt, worries about his upcoming trip on the Concorde.

"Going 1,050 miles an hour, who knows what can happen?" he said. He

remembers the fears of his first trip alone, a New York-to-Wilmington run at age 7. "The train was really late. I was worried that the man who was going to meet me wouldn't be able to wait. The conductor was nice — told me about the stops and everything. But I

never knew exactly what was going to happen next."

"The crucial thing," Dr. Salk emphasized, "is to provide as much certainty and structure ahead of time." That means telling children about ticketing procedures, meals, using lavatory facilities, meeting people at the other end — everything that will happen as well as what *might* happen.

Parents shouldn't shy away from discussing delays, layovers, rerouting, missed connections. Answer all questions, even those not asked: Who should the child turn to if there are problems or questions? What should be done if the person supposed to be at the other end doesn't show up? Where can the child reach the parent by phone?

"Parents should treat children as if they're independent and resourceful," said Dr. Salk. "If they're not, they shouldn't be traveling alone."

Children who take part in the preparation and are given information to help them cope make the most successful travelers. And in the face of the unexpected, they're often more relaxed than their parents.

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Lois Morosco, who works for Amtrak, recounted the story of a 9-year-old girl whose father was concerned about a three-hour delay caused by a power failure.

"He was upset because the girl was stuck on the stalled train," she said. "He thought she might panic, even get off the train." A local agent was dispatched to locate the girl. "She was perfectly happy. In fact, she couldn't have cared less!"

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