

A LITTLE KINDNESS

By David Smiedt

Mandatory disclaimer: I don't have kids. But I sure have travelled with them. Look around you now and you'll probably see – from the back, anyway – what look like empty seats. Except they're not. Cock your ear and you're likely to hear an exasperated parent speaking in what they think is a whisper: "Brendan, don't push that button. Brendan, stop kicking the seat. Brendan, get your finger out of that man's ear."

You'll also notice those around Brendan swapping eye rolls and sighs or, in extreme cases, giving Brendan's harried parents the kind of death stare usually reserved for he who has inadvertently impregnated one's sister.

The long haul/kids combo does have its challenges. There are the screams at decibel levels that make the term 'noise-cancelling' redundant when it comes to headphones. There is the almost constant opening and closing of carry-on baggage to retrieve nappies, toys and sedatives (for the parents). There is the girlish gasp you inadvertently make when opening your eyes from a fitful sleep, only to find a strange and inquisitive four-year-old face mere centimetres from yours. And there is the near-fatal mistake of getting involved in a game of peekaboo, which you mistakenly assume has a novelty value of five minutes for the child but, in fact, leads to more meaningful eye contact than the most successful of first dates.

That said, you've got it easy. While you may be mildly inconvenienced, the person in charge of the child is the one facing the arduous journey you think you're suffering. Meanwhile, a young mind with no comprehension of body clock, time zones, changes in air pressure, earache and why Mummy is praying for a tailwind is forced to combat challenges it has never encountered.

If you're one of those travellers who turns into a belligerent pensioner every time a child does what children do – "They should have their own section. What was she thinking, flying with two children under four? In my day, we sent them to boarding school until they were 18 and then off to the army to drum their personalities


out of them" – I have four words for you. The first two are 'chill' and 'out'. The third and fourth are 'foam' and 'earplugs'. Available from most airport pharmacies, think of them as your investment in quiet.

They can also provide hours of entertainment for easily amused children, which I discovered when I inserted one into a nostril (mine, not theirs), blocked off the other nostril and blew hard – only for the earplug to become an unlikely projectile.

Which brings us to the next point. Unless you happen to be curing cancer on your laptop, why don't you follow Brian McFadden's lead – not a sentence you read every day – by offering to help someone struggling with kids during a flight. If you happen to be awake and have already read a certain fabulous in-flight magazine from cover to cover, it's not like you have somewhere else to be, so dip a toe into the waters of interaction.

If you're a parent with some experience in this area, go beyond mere empathy and put your skills to good use. It may be something as simple as retrieving a bottle from a bag or distracting junior while Mum goes to the loo.

Even if you're not a parent and you feel a tad clueless about how to offer assistance, remember that kids can be rather entertaining company on board. They have an enthusiasm for travel that's as infectious as flu in a kindy. Everything is new and exciting – "I can see lights down there" and "There's a spot for every bit of my lunch on this tray!" – which I find rather refreshing.

If interaction sounds like too much of a stretch, I understand. Not everyone craves the adulation of a prepubescent audience that has never seen a grown-up shoot an earplug from his nose. At the very least, however, remind yourself of your own journeys as a child and the sense of wonder they entailed. Then allow others to experience the same. If that doesn't work, there are always those cute little bottles of Scotch... 



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