

# IN FOR THE LONG-HAUL

FASTEN SEAT BELT WHILE SEATED

USE BOTTOM CUSHION FOR FLOT

AT THE END of a recent flight from Hong Kong to London, an air stewardess walked over to a mother who was with her two children and asked if she'd slept well on the 14-hour flight. When the woman replied that she had, the stewardess rebuked, "good, well nobody else did."

And she was right. After take-off from Hong Kong the mother had drunk enough alcohol to ensure she passed out while her two young children ran riot around the plane at regular intervals throughout the night. Attempts to intervene by other passengers (including myself) and cabin crew didn't help much and most of the passengers were left hoping the cabin crew would employ their plastic handcuffs.

Perhaps an extreme example, but there can't be many who wouldn't admit feeling a little worried on seeing a young family settle down near them for a long-haul flight.

A survey conducted recently among regular Business Class passengers singled out children as the most annoying part of their in-flight experience, with 75% of 1,000 premium-paying passengers saying that nothing annoyed them more than children running through the Business Class aisle or hearing noisy children and babies in Economy Class.

The results of the survey have been published ahead of the Business Travel and Meetings Show. The show's Event Director, David Chappel, said, "A number of train operators have introduced quiet zones on services to stop passengers using mobile phones. The idea of banning children from cabins altogether is certainly an interesting one. I'd be fascinated to see how airlines react." He is not alone in calling on airlines to consider introducing child-free flights or separate families only zones in the plane cabin.

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Travel journalist, Dave Richardson, is spearheading a campaign for adult-only cabin area and would like families segregated from other passengers on planes. He believes that airlines should aim to keep lucrative business and first-class passengers happy by introducing quiet cabins, adding that many airlines currently use the Boeing 747 plan which has two decks that would make the separation of non-parents and families much easier.

The flight comparison site, Skyscanner, recently re-issued its findings from a poll of 2,000 passengers in which 77% of the respondents cited children as the greatest source of irritation for passengers; many wanted to see family-only sections in the cabin provision.

Even parents surveyed didn't want to put up with other people's children. Of those who were parents themselves, 48% said that they didn't want a families-only section as they didn't want to

sit next to other people's 'little horrors'. Just 31% of the parents were in favour of an allocated section of the cabin.

Is this a problem that needs a solution or merely the whining of intolerant adults firmly of the belief that children should be seen and not heard? The answer, as is often the case, lies somewhere between the opposite ends of the spectrum.

Fiona Foster, BBC Television News Reporter introducing the BBC Fast:Track programme entitled: Why flying with children can spoil a dream trip, says, "lively youngsters in a cramped, enclosed space for hours at a time are a recipe for a mini-meltdown and a less than peaceful flight for those around them."

There is no doubt that some passengers' flight experiences are spoiled by unruly youngsters but current cabin arrangements cannot guarantee immunity from noisy or naughty children no matter what the cost of the airline ticket, says Fiona.

Associated Press travel editor, Beth Harpaz, wrote a newspaper column in 2007 suggesting that there appeared to be a growing backlash against travelling families and, particularly, kids on planes. She received nearly 1,700 responses – almost equally divided – from angry or supportive readers. "I used to cover Hillary Clinton and she was not nearly so controversial as the issue of a baby crying on a plane," she said.

Four years down the line, more people are flying than ever before. Children are a part of public life as never before. "More of us are encountering more children, for longer periods of time, in airports and on planes. With the new carry-on restrictions, security ordeals and long delays that are now routine, all of us – kids and adults alike – are in worse moods than ever," says Harpaz.

## CHILD FREE FLIGHTS?

But are child-free flights a viable option for the airlines? Probably not, given that the numbers of passengers they would lose would almost certainly outweigh those gained. Many of the airlines go to great lengths to create child-friendly environments. Gulf Air has employed Sky Nannies since 2003 on their long haul flights to support parents with young children on-board. Many airlines place great importance on their service responsibilities to passengers with children.

The idea of child free flights or zones would be both controversial and unethical according to Frank Barrett, travel editor of the Mail on Sunday.

"Much as I hate being kept awake all night by a grizzling child, I think that starting to introduce passenger apartheid might be a dangerous step," he says. "Where would it end? Banning fat people, roping off anyone who has smelly breath? We'll just have to grin and bear the presence of kiddies," he concludes rather wistfully.

There has been a somewhat muted response from the UK airlines to the Business Class passenger survey. A spokesperson for British Airways stated, "We do our best to help families travelling to have as smooth a journey as possible. We do a lot of research into what our customers want and are always looking into new ways of making their journey as comfortable and enjoyable as possible."



Virgin Atlantic said that it had no plans to introduce cabin areas that specifically catered for adults only. Compromise would seem to be the order of the day.

One of the most effective ways of dealing with children's noisy or unruly behaviour, according to many passengers, would be for cabin crew staff to be more vigilant and pro-active about looking out for potentially disruptive kids during boarding as well as during the flight and advising parents that outbursts and unacceptable behaviour on-board will not be tolerated. Too many parents, some passengers believe, abdicate their responsibilities and do not address their children's inconsiderate behaviour. Nor is it just kids in the firing line. Fifty nine

### “Where would it end? Banning fat people, roping off anyone who has smelly breath?”

per cent of passengers in the Skyscanner survey found stag and hen groups and football supporters extremely annoying and rowdy.

Many parents, however, are singled out for praise by their fellow passengers for the way they do their best for their children, even if those children may be fractious. Responsible parenting is generally appreciated.

One of the adult passengers surveyed commented, “I don't have a problem with kids on a plane. I have a problem with the parents who think it is acceptable for their kids to do whatever they want on the plane, utterly oblivious to the hundreds of other passengers that are also on the flight.”

Many travellers also believe that the airlines should bear some responsibility for helping adults prepare for a flight with their offspring. Airline websites could possibly do a better job of telling new parents what to expect on a flight.

Views about kids on planes tend to be polarised - with the pro-quiet zone lobby adamant that passengers have a reasonable right to a quiet, comfortable, safe journey - and the other side, sympathetic adults and parents who know that young children in a cramped airplane can present problems for their own parents and others.

Of course it can be annoying when other people - adults or children - infringe upon your personal comfort zone but that's all part and parcel of what you sign up to when using public modes of transportation. There are many different kinds of travellers on a plane that we'd all rather avoid, if possible, including those with poor hygiene, coughers and sneezers, seat-kickers, loud talkers, arm-rest hoggers, snorers... the list is endless.

Of course, if any passenger, young or old, is disruptive enough to be considered a safety hazard to self or others, the airline crew has a right and duty to take appropriate action. But as most of these situations aren't that extreme: some quality earphones and a smile go a long way when you're locked inside a pressurised aluminium tube. After all, you can't really expect the child to play outside.