

PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE

» A View from the Right Seat



COURTESY BRIAN DEEDS



Brian Deeds (above, with his wife and two sons) pointed out that flying together as a family is both an adventure and a lesson in responsibility.

Flying with Kids: Safety Lessons from Cirrus Pilots and Families

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta



LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now owns a Cirrus SR22. With John as the pilot-in-command and Laurie as the partner, they regularly travel to see family, visit friends and enjoy our beautiful country. You can read more of Laurie's work on her website: www.laurieeinsteinkoszuta.com.

Since becoming grandparents two years ago, we've imagined what it might be like to strap our grandson in a car seat for his first ride in our Cirrus. We can picture him, sitting next to me in the backseat, wide-eyed and curious, chattering in his small voice as the clouds come into view.

At 2-years-old, he already loves planes. His eyes light up when he looks at picture books about airplanes. He immediately shouts "P-pa's plane!" at the cartoonish images of wings and propellers. He's been to the airport and seen our red Cirrus, hesitant at first to get close, but soon, allowing P-pa (his name for Grandpa) to carry him into the cockpit.

Right now taking him for a flight is a daydream, as his parents might never allow us to take him up. Flying with children sounds both magical and daunting as it introduces many variables. What's the best advice for traveling with little co-pilots? The consensus among seasoned Cirrus families is that preparation is key.

» **A preflight** talk about how headsets can protect your ears from airplane noise and that everyone on board wears one, often helps convince children to keep them on during flight.

Booster Seats and More

“If the child is old enough, use a booster seat,” said Shari Meyer, a 2023 SR22T G6 pilot who often flies with her 6-year-old granddaughter. “It lifts them up so they can see out the window. We keep her buckled the entire flight, just like in a car. As the pilot, I don’t want her to become a flying projectile, especially if we hit unexpected bumps.”

Brian Deeds, a 2017 SR22T G6 pilot, agreed, “My 7-year-old still uses a booster. I like it because it keeps the belt properly positioned across his chest.”

According to Justin Miller, a 2017 SR22 G6 pilot, seat positioning for multiple children can take some trial and error. “My kids are 8, 5 and 3,” he said. “We’ve flown with them for two years. Our oldest sits in the middle; the other two use Costco booster seats that fit perfectly on the three-wide split back seat and transfer easily to a rental car.”

All agree that forward-facing car seats, even for infants, work best, while rear-facing restraints can interfere with the front seats or headset cords, making it harder to tend to a child in flight. In G5, G6 and G7 models, all seats utilize automotive-style three-point lap-shoulder belts, making most child restraints compatible. For earlier generations, it is essential to confirm the car seat is compatible and will fit. Always double-check



that the belt is securely buckled, the latch isn’t twisted, and the routing and tension are correct before loading luggage.

Most modern car seats are certified for use in aviation. Still, pilots should always double-check for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) label reading: “This restraint is certified for use in motor vehicles and aircraft.”

Expert Advice

While it may seem obvious, pilots should consider the weight of a car seat when doing their weight and balance computation. And never, under any circumstances, should two children share one seat belt. Even if their combined weight falls within the limits, a single belt cannot safely restrain both during turbulence or impact.

To protect upholstery from permanent indentations, some pilots recommend using a car seat protector, such as the Munchkin Auto Seat Protector. Its stabilizing wedge fits securely and the low-profile design fits both single and bench seats.

What About Headsets?

Cirrus cabins are noisy, so good hearing protection is essential. Headsets are available with or without active noise reduction (ANR). “I’m comfortable without noise reduction,” said Meyer. “My granddaughter does fine with a basic children’s aviation headset.”

Miller, who is also an ear, nose and throat physician, agreed. “We use basic children’s aviation headsets without noise



COURTESY JUSTIN MILLER

➤ **According to Justin Miller**, seat positioning for multiple children may take some trial and error. Booster seats are recommended so the kids can see out the window; it also helps with proper seat belt positioning.

reduction or Bluetooth. If needed, they wear earbuds under the headsets to hear their iPads. As long as the headset provides proper hearing protection, I'm comfortable without ANR."

For older kids, there are lightweight in-ear models, such as the Clarity Aloft or Halo that parents, like pilot Roy Jageman, who owned a 2005 SR22 G2, recommended. For infants, towel-wrapped earmuffs or Baby Banz can be good options, as many other aviation headsets don't fit. Some parents prefer the Hush Hat, which uses soft, sound-absorbing foam for comfort and noise reduction.

Even with the right headset, cockpit audio can be a test of patience for pilots and adults in the cabin.

"You finally get the panel set just right with ATC, alerts, music, and then one of the kids screams into the mic and blows your eardrums," laughed James Custis, a 2006 SR22 G2 pilot. "Sometimes you can barely hear them because the mic is 4 inches away from their mouth, then they suddenly shout with the mic practically touching their tonsils."

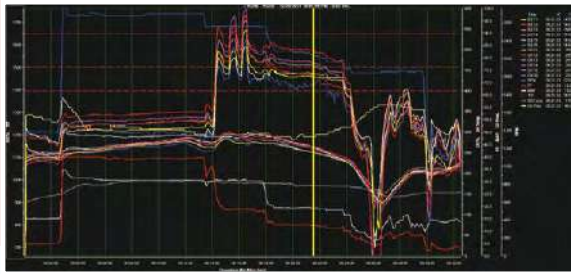
Teaching mic etiquette from an early age does help, but it should be continually reinforced. No shouting, coughing or sneezing into the mic. Instead, just move it aside. "We practiced with walkie-talkies at home," said Custis. "Once it became a game, things usually went smoother on the airplane."

When workload spikes, even good mic manners may not be enough. Pilots

recommend using the pilot isolate function at such times. Still, it's beneficial to have another adult on board, especially with young children, as kids often need something during inconvenient times.

Even with all the pre-planning, young kids may pull off the headset and refuse to put it back on. The reason might be more than curiosity, and could be due to discomfort when wearing the headset or even tickling from the microphone boom. In such cases, several families note that they keep a lightweight pair of passive earmuffs (with fun designs) on hand as a backup. While they won't allow intercom communication, they'll protect hearing and prevent tears if a child gets uncomfortable. A gentle pre-flight talk about how "these protect your

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Many pilots pass down the wonder of flight to their children and/or grew up in aviation. Here, COPA member Bryan Courtney with two of his children.

ears from airplane noise” often helps, as does demonstrating that everyone on board wears one too.

Another reminder is to always test the volume before connecting a child’s headset to the intercom, as accidental spikes in sound can startle or harm their hearing.

Safety First

For the Deeds family, flying is both an adventure and a lesson in responsibility, especially when they fly together, with their two boys, ages 7 and 10.

“I have a ‘sterile cockpit’ policy,” Deeds said. “They know it means quiet during preflight, taxi, takeoff, climb, approach

and landing. I announce those phases and enforce them. If necessary, I’ll mute them.”

“We even practice evacuation drills and propeller safety in our hangar,” Deeds noted. “My 10-year-old has practiced pulling the CAPS handle in a simulator. We discuss how to open doors and what to do if mom or dad can’t help. We treat safety awareness as normal, not scary.”

Meyer emphasized another safety tip. “I keep the flaps down so my granddaughter knows where not to step when she climbs in and out of the plane. Of course, I’m always right there supervising.”

Bryan Courtney, a 2017 SR22 G6 pilot, said, “I always preflight while the kids

stay in the FBO with my wife or if she is not there, they stay in a shaded area under the wing; I never leave them unattended inside.”

“Every family sets their own limits,” Courtney continued. “I’d fly to the Bahamas with another adult, but not with my children. If we had to deploy CAPS over water, the parachute could pull the plane sideways and fill the canopy with water. I’m comfortable with overland flights, but over-water just isn’t worth the risk.”

Many families keep younger children in the back with an adult, while older kids can sit in the right seat. Miller added, “It’s not good for kids to be in front. The shoulder harness often pushes up



COURTESY BRYAN COURTNEY

“Before a child’s first flight, explain bumps, noises and sensations they might experience and set clear boundaries about what is and isn’t allowed ...”

purchased a seat belt cutter to keep in the center console, just in case. And even though we rarely fly over water, I still worry that if we had a CAPS pull and ended up in a pond or a lake, we’d need flotation. So I always carry life jackets, no matter how dry the route seems.”

In-Flight Rules and Behavior

Before a child’s first flight, explain bumps, noises and sensations they might experience and set clear boundaries about what is and isn’t allowed, such as no touching knobs or switches. Have a plan in place to handle restlessness and panic before they occur.

Some families allow their children to unbuckle only in smooth, stable air. “Once we are level, they ask permission,” said Custis. “The first thing they do is crawl on the floorboards, cover themselves with a blanket and play. But if we encounter rough air, they immediately re-buckle and put everything away.”

Altitude and Oxygen

Altitude comfort is another overlooked challenge when flying with kids. Rapid altitude changes can affect adults, but children often are less tolerant of such changes. Therefore, many pilots cruise at lower altitudes.

Courtney maintains gentle descents, about 400–500 fpm, to prevent ear pain. “I got into the habit of requesting lower altitudes earlier for that reason.”

“If we are too high and ATC wants us to descend more rapidly, I let them know there are children on board, their ears are bothering them and I need a slower descent,” said Custis. “They usually are agreeable and let me do a couple of 360-degree turns or go into a holding pattern.”

One COPA member noted that he has added remarks to his flight plan stating, “baby onboard, gradual climbs and descents requested. Later, ATC asked mid-flight, ‘How’s the baby doing?’”

Another suggestion is to encourage chewing food or gum, swallowing or sipping to equalize pressure during climb and descent to help relieve ear pressure.

Meyer prefers early morning flights, which often provide the smoothest air and fewest complaints.

Snacks

Snacks can provide both comfort and entertainment. Most pilots recommend packing non-messy snacks, such as string cheese, dried fruit or mini granola bars. “If it’s messy, keep a small shop vac handy,” said Courtney, who keeps a small cooler between the seats for longer trips.

The Custis family uses a Chick-fil-A nugget tray as a treat that is stored in a center cooler, from which everyone can snack throughout the trip.

Meyer has a different approach. “I don’t allow eating in my plane,” she admitted, “so my granddaughter never expects it. I keep a few snacks, but rarely use them.”

on their headsets, making it extremely uncomfortable, and making them want to take them off.”

He said he learned the hard way about the dangers of young kids in the front seat on a hot summer day during a very bumpy flight. “I had my 3-year-old in the right seat and she was nervous. On climb out, she put her left hand on the mixture. My immediate reflex was to push her hand away. That was my biggest realization about the control and awareness I need to have because my son knows not to do that. That never happens anymore.”

“I try to think ahead,” he added. “I don’t trust my girls to be able to unbuckle their seatbelts properly in an emergency. I



COURTESY BRIAN DEEDS & JUSTIN MILLER

» **Some pilots get their kids involved** with the flight, including preflight duties, and feel it lays the groundwork for a lifetime of “safe, curious flyers.”

Hydration matters, but pilots agree: Limit drinks before and during flight. Bathroom breaks are tough at altitude, and kids rarely give much warning. If you do bring drinks, choose spill-proof bottles without straws, as pressure changes can cause liquid to shoot out unexpectedly.

Bathroom

A quick bathroom stop before boarding can make all the difference. Keep disposable urinals, such as the TravelJohn and TravelJane, on board and demonstrate their use before departure. Pack wipes, extra clothes, airsick kits and kitchen-size garbage bags to store soiled items.

Younger passengers might need breaks more often. Many families plan legs of two to three hours, with stops for lunch or the bathroom.

Team Flying

For many families, flying together is as much about teamwork as it is about travel. Deeds involves his sons in age-appropriate preflight tasks, such as sampling fuel (under supervision), chocking and helping load bags. “They love being part of the crew,” he said. “One already spots traffic on ForeFlight before I do.”

Jageman added that a sense of teamwork makes every flight a learning experience and lays the groundwork for a lifetime of safe, curious flyers.

Keeping It Fun

Meyer ties destinations to fun. “Once we surprised our granddaughter by flying her to school after a weather delay,” she laughed. “She recognized the destination from the air.”

“I don’t usually allow tablets during flights unless I expect things to get intense,” said Courtney. “Sometimes I’ll relent and let them watch something on an iPad, but they don’t expect it. They listen to music, read or sleep.”

One forum pilot gives each child a point-and-shoot camera or an old iPhone set to camera mode to capture their view from the sky. It turns them into explorers rather than restless passengers.

Deeds said his 7-year-old likes helping him navigate, enjoys listening to air traffic control and is constantly checking the avionics.

For many pilots, the greatest joys of flying isn’t just in the clouds; it’s in the wonder it inspires. For now, our grandson’s delight at P-pa’s red plane says it all.