

GUY MAHER

Finally, you've received that coveted private-pilot's license. Now it's time to prove to your spouse and kids, (or your girlfriend or boyfriend and kids) that all you've been telling them is true. Flying is a fun, fast way to get around and it was worth the sacrifice of time and money for you to learn how. What you do next, especially with little kids, will either make all your promises come true or reduce your flying to one-hour solo trips once a month.

I have three children, ages five, six and ten. They all will jump into my Cardinal at a minute's notice. They love flying — instrument flight conditions and all. I'm no child psychologist, but I've learned from experience what it takes to keep the kids high on flying.

My oldest child made her first flight with me when she was about four months old. There is no way to convince a four-month-old that flying is fun. Even at this age, you must be careful not to fly in such a way that may cause ear damage. An infant knows only to cry if there is a problem...normally when hungry, wet or in some sort of pain. Slow climbs and descents accompanied by feeding helps keep the ears clear. A hood, soft hat or ear muffs can help reduce the noise on those sensitive ears and can reduce some of the fear.

When children are of the age that you can actually start communicating with them, your most important work begins. If children are being forced in any way, as all parents know, they will resist, and you've just shot about five good flying years. Flying must be made fun, special, worry-free and an obvious escape from the normal rules of their everyday world. After all, isn't that why we fly?

My oldest child's first real introduction to small airplanes was a drive to the airport and a hand-held walk around some of the planes. I let her sit

sky kids



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Preparing children for their first airplane rides

in the plane, turn the yoke and play a little. If she resisted any suggestions in any way, I backed off immediately. We watched some planes take off and land while I told her I knew how to do that and it was really fun. I asked her if she would like to fly with me someday, and she said, "yes." Instead of jumping in the airplane, we went to her favorite lunch place and talked more about how much fun flying is before we went home.

We repeated this about a week later, and I said nothing about flying. I just waited, and it worked. She asked me when we were going flying. "Next week," I said. (It was difficult to resist the temptation to go then, but it paid off in the long run.) During the week I talked about how much fun flying would be, and I gave her a picture of

the plane to show to her friends.

By the time our day had arrived, she was wired. *We* did the preflight. Of course, she was a good helper! I placed her familiar car seat in the plane so that she was in a secure environment and could see out of the window. Children must be able to *see* without effort. The flight was smooth, with shallow climbs, banks and descents, and it was *short*. The total time on the Hobbs was less than a half hour. We broke a rule though; she got to have a candy treat before lunch — while we were flying (during the descent, to aid ear clearing, but she didn't know that).

"All right, Dad, this is fun!!!" she said. I pointed out the small houses, cars, etc. I even showed her our house. The important point is that she had

fun, and we quit while she still wanted more. The final step was to take a picture of her standing by the plane. It's amazing how the combination of all of the above can actually make kids believe they had more fun than they really did.

I used this same break-in procedure on my two subsequent children with the same results. Having an older sister to help in the process made it easier, too. The little ones would look at their big sister, notice that she was having a blast, and decided that flying must be OK.

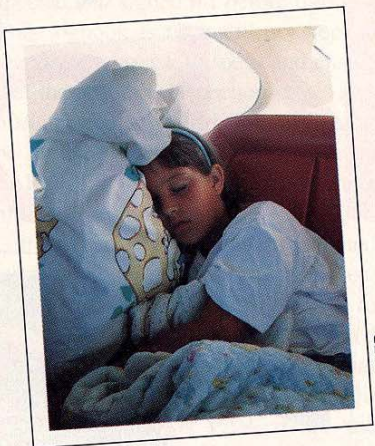
As the child progresses into a seasoned short-range flyer, it's time to start traveling. Again, make the reason to fly something special. A trip to a nearby airport for a hamburger, or even vending machine cookies and a soda will even do. Flying to a nearby airshow was popular with my kids. By this time, your spouse or friend should be included in the travel routine because the ultimate goal is to work toward long-range travel. I don't suggest travel with a child who is less than four years old without the help of another adult, especially if flying in IFR conditions or high-density areas.

During these short trips, develop a routine. Let the kids take a favorite doll or toy. Coloring books are always good for passing the time. Car booster seats are especially helpful. Kids know they don't move around in them in the car, and therefore, this rule doesn't change in the plane. My kids love to take pillows and blankets. A small tape player with headphones to play their favorite tapes is also a hit.

When it's finally time to make the big trip, preparation starts days before. Snacks are a must for longer trips, but choose them wisely. Lots of drinks are not a good idea if you plan a three- to four-hour non-stop trip. Pretzels, fruit candy and gum work well. Don't forget to save some of the treats for the descent to help keep the ears clear.

Don't rush the kids to bed the night before. If they wake up a little tired and you take off early (always recom-

mended), they'll probably sleep through the first half of the trip. Skip the morning breakfast cereal and juice routine because it guarantees a mid-trip pit stop. Toast, pastries, pop tarts, etc., have given me very favorable results. If I notice that the child is a little



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congested in the morning, a small dose of a children's decongestant works very well, prevents later ear problems, and actually helps the child sleep during the flight. Check with your doctor on this one, however. I followed the doctor's advice and have had no problems during the past 10 years.

Kids look for clues from us and from other passengers on what to do and how to react. I remember one trip when I was in the pilot seat, my oldest daughter was in the right seat, my wife was in the right rear seat, and my youngest daughter was in the left rear seat. We were in IFR conditions with some bumps. Everything was going fine until, with a disgusted look on my face, I pushed the reset button on the Stormscope while talking to air traffic control (ATC).

I had a headset on, which prevented my wife from hearing what was happening. I got mad because ATC wanted to vector me where I didn't want to go, foiling my attempt to give the kids a better ride. My wife thought we were in trouble, became upset and ultimately got sick. This scared the devil out of my youngest, who watched her mother like a hawk. (My

oldest slept through the whole event!) The rest of the flight was uneventful, but it took me over a year to get that child back into a pattern of wanting to fly. I didn't force it, just worked at it. By doing so, she now rides through bumpy IFR like it's nothing.

As your kids get older (to about four) and have some flying experience, let them turn the wheel, drop the flaps, hold the maps or checklist and flashlight. This really makes a difference in passing the time and gives an obvious boost to their self esteem. If your kids are older when you introduce them to flying, the specific techniques will differ, but the intent is the same. Don't force the issue, pick the right day, make your passengers comfortable, make no abrupt maneuvers, and keep the initial ride short. Always have them leave the airplane while still wanting more.

Whatever you do, *don't* show them where the sick sacks are. I've been on flights where sacks were introduced to people who hadn't previously thought of getting sick. Now they did. Better to learn to read the signs of a passenger becoming sick and react to prevent it. I've had only two barfed cockpits in more than 20 years and 7,000 hours of flying. I don't break this rule.

We fly because we enjoy it. We fly on trips because it saves time. In our excitement, we can inadvertently rush things that should be taken slowly. Related to the airplane, this could be fatal. Related to getting our kids excited about flying and keeping them that way, one mistake could kill any chance of future flying fun.

About half way through a recent 500-mile trip, the kids wanted a snack. My four-year-old son was copilot. Fully content after finishing his snack, he noticed I was trying to eat, hold the wheel and attend to other important pilot stuff. He slid up to the wheel, handed me the bag of Skittles from between the seats, took hold of the controls and said, as confidently as he could, "You eat, I'll drive!" Yes, it was truly worth all the time and effort.

