

Fort Worth Business Press

September 3, 2004

FAA should mandate more kids 'Care in the Air'

Which is more important – a child or a coffee pot? Easy, now try this: Which is more important – a child or a laptop computer? OK, last question: Which is more important – a child or a piece of luggage?



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If you're sensing a theme here, and if you chose "a child" as the answer to each of those questions, read on. Those of you who are either theme-challenged, or didn't choose "a child" can and should consider a career with the Federal Aviation Administration.

And I'm not being flip. All right, perhaps just a little. But the truth of the matter is that the federal aviation regulations require the airlines to assure that there are no loose objects that could fly about in the cabin of an airplane in the event of turbulence. Before takeoff, flight attendants carefully secure loose bags under seats, frown on folks with lingering laptops and even lock in the coffee pots. I'm not making it up. The coffee pots get a secure ride.

What about the kids, you ask? Well, if you've seen the new A&E reality show "Airline," you know that passengers over age two must be safely buckled into their seats. Parents who can prove their child is under two sigh with relief when they learn that they won't be "forced" to purchase an extra ticket. That's because the FAA allows children under two to ride on their parents' laps – with no seat, no seat belt and nothing to prevent a tragedy if and when a real emergency occurs.

Just recently, the National Transportation Safety Board decided that the practice of allowing so-called "lap children" on airplanes is unacceptable. Because the NTSB only acts in an advisory fashion, don't look for the FAA to mandate safety for children on airplanes any time soon. In fact, the FAA – in a bit of convoluted logic only a bureaucracy could dream up – says it's against requiring seats for youngsters under two because such a requirement might force low income parents to opt instead for transportation by car, where accident rates are higher.

Let's talk cars then. Every parent in every state knows that it's mandatory to buckle up the kids for a ride in the car. Holding a child in your lap in a vehicle moving at 60 miles per hour is unheard

of – and any person found to have done so in a crash would likely face charges of criminal negligence or child endangerment. There is simply no logic to the idea that the same child can ride safely, sitting unsecured on a parent's lap, in an airplane flying at a speed of up to 500 miles per hour.

A 23-month-old child could weigh as much as 32 pounds. The G forces that could occur in flight act to multiply the weight of that child – at 2 Gs, it doubles, at 3Gs, it triples and so forth. It doesn't take a full-fledged accident to risk injury; multiple G forces can occur in a hard landing, clear air turbulence, a rain or snowstorm, a rejected takeoff, a near-midair collision or an emergency landing. Even a comparatively tame 2-G bump would challenge a startled parent to hang onto a squirming, 60-plus-pound weight. At 3 Gs or 4 Gs, it would likely be impossible for anyone to hang onto that child and keep it safe.

Another factor increasing the risk of serious injury to small children is the trend toward tightly packed rows. On most U.S. airlines, the distance between the front face of your seat and the seat-back in front of you is less than 30 inches. As the parent is thrown against the seat in front, the child could be crushed

or dropped.

Beyond the obvious risk to the child itself, an unrestrained child poses a risk of injury to other passengers in the cabin, in the same manner a loose coffee pot might. And, in the event of a cabin depressurization, parents should consider that there might not be an extra oxygen mask installed over the seat where the child is held.

The FAA recommends, but does not require:

- A rear-facing child restraint system for children weighing under 20 pounds;
- A forward-facing system for children weighing between 20 and 40 pounds; and
- A seat with a standard lap belt for children weighing over 40 pounds, regardless of age.

It's abundantly clear that the FAA should turn its recommendations into rule, but in the interim, the recommendations provide a good guideline for parents.

After all, most parents wouldn't dream of taking a trip in a car without buckling up their children. Isn't it time we started taking the same care in the air?

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