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Kids flying solo: How to manage flights for unaccompanied minors



Arriving in Chicago after a long solo flight. Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

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By Katherine Rodeghier

They turned their backs and marched down the jetway following the gate agent, two heads of tousled hair held high, backpacks swinging with each step. Just before they disappeared from view, they turned in unison and called, "See you at Christmas, Grandma."

Sending my grandsons home after a summer visit meant they would fly alone. When families spread out between far-flung destinations, it's an option parents use to keep kids connected to the other adults in their lives.

Airlines offer programs for flying unaccompanied minors designed to make the process safe and seamless. While the procedures are similar, parents should check each airline's requirements.



An airline gate agent escorts children flying alone onto their flight. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Booking a flight

My grandsons were 8 and 10 on this flight, but in most cases kids can fly alone starting at 5 on the day of departure. The extra charge for unaccompanied minor service, typically \$150 one way plus any tax, usually includes two to four children. Once a minor turns 15, the service is often optional. Southwest Airlines charges \$100 one way for each child age 5 to 11. Some airlines take reservations only by phone; others online.

Connections may be allowed only for older kids and the choice of connecting airports may be limited. A few airlines, including American Airlines and Delta Air Lines, operate lounges for kids making

connections through some hub airports. On Southwest, kids can take flights that make stops but don't require a change of planes or flight numbers. United Airlines doesn't allow connections unless an adult meets the child at the connection point.

Preparing to fly

In addition to checked or carry-on luggage, pack a backpack or a bag small enough to fit under the seat. Include TSA-approved snacks, money and — depending on the child's age and interests — books, games, headphones, fully charged devices and their charging cables. Attach an ID card with the child's name and contact information to the bag and/or the child's jacket.

At the airport, point out the uniforms of airline personnel and instruct the child to follow or approach only adults in those uniforms.



Allow plenty of time before a flight to complete paperwork at the airline ticket counter. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Checking in

Minors cannot be checked in online. Arrive at the airport well before the minimum check-in time and go to the airline's ticket counter to complete paperwork and check any luggage. On one of my grandsons' trips, this took about 40 minutes.

Give the agent your phone number and address as well as the phone number and address of the adult picking up the child. Show your government-issued photo ID and an ID for the child, such as a birth certificate or passport. When traveling internationally, some countries require permits for minors to

travel without parents. If the children will be filling out a customs form on the plane, write down the information they'll need.

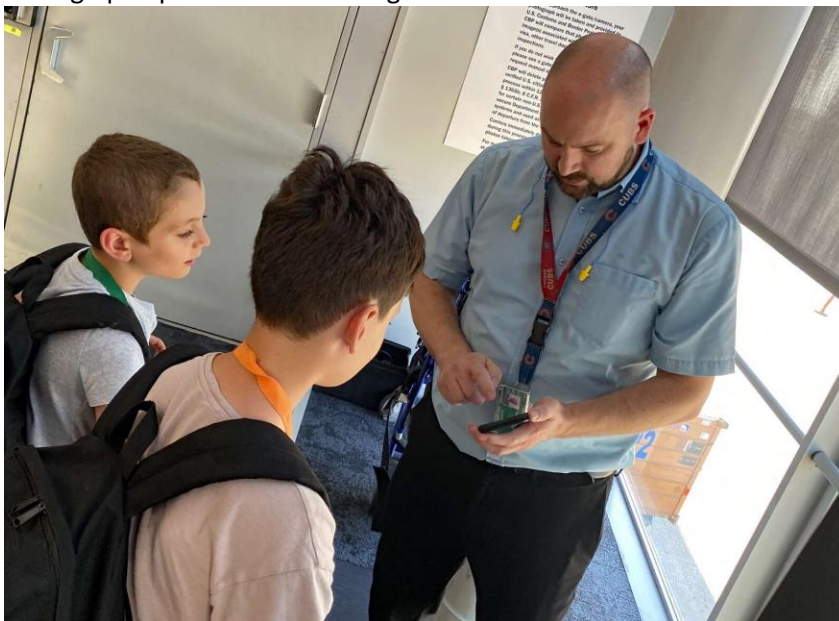


Wristbands help identify kids flying solo. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Kids might be given lanyards or wristbands with identifying data, such as a QR code. You will be given a packet of documents, the child's ID, boarding pass and a security pass so you can take the child to the departure gate.

Tell the gate agent you have an unaccompanied minor. Often kids are boarded early. The agent will escort the child onto the plane to be handed off to a flight attendant. Airlines require you to remain in the airport until the child's flight is in the air. I used an app on my phone to see when my grandsons' flight had left the ground.

When departing from airports abroad, the child may be escorted from the ticket counter through passport control to the gate.



Gate agents check the IDs and documents of unaccompanied minors. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

During the flight

Airlines usually choose the child's seat, often at the rear of the plane so flight attendants can keep an eye on them from the galley. While attendants can't continuously monitor kids, they show them how to use the call button, seat belt and any entertainment system, point out restrooms and serve food and drinks if there is a meal service. Attendants can't hold or administer medication.

Kids must wait in their seats until an attendant can escort them off the plane. If they are making a connection, they will be escorted to their next flight.

If there's a problem

Airlines reserve the right not to accept an unaccompanied minor if there is a threat of a flight disruption, such as bad weather or operational problems. The child will be rebooked on another flight. If a child misses a connection, an adult listed on their unaccompanied minor form will be contacted and airline personnel will stay with the child until escorted onto another flight. If an overnight stay is needed, airlines arrange accommodations, meals and supervision.

Picking up

When picking up a child, budget plenty of time to obtain a security pass at the ticket counter so you can meet the child upon arrival at the gate. In some situations, the child may be escorted to baggage claim for pickup. For international travel, an airline employee escorts the child and any checked luggage through immigration and customs and meets you in the arrivals area.

Your ID must match the one on the child's documents. If someone else is picking up the child, clear it with the airline in advance.

My grandsons burst through the arrivals door at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, smiling after a long flight from Amsterdam. Their United Airlines escort checked my ID and scanned the code on their wristbands. I signed a release form on a tablet and we were off on our summer adventure.

More details on airline websites

United: [united.com/en/us/fly/travel/accessibility-and-assistance/unaccompanied-minors.html#uponarrival](https://www.united.com/en/us/fly/travel/accessibility-and-assistance/unaccompanied-minors.html#uponarrival)

Southwest: support.southwest.com/helpcenter/s/article/Unaccompanied-Minor-Terms-and-Conditions

American: [aa.com/i18n/travel-info/special-assistance/unaccompanied-minors.jsp](https://www.aa.com/i18n/travel-info/special-assistance/unaccompanied-minors.jsp)

Delta: [delta.com/us/en/children-infant-travel/unaccompanied-minor-program](https://www.delta.com/us/en/children-infant-travel/unaccompanied-minor-program)

<https://www.dailyherald.com/20260528/travel/kids-flying-solo-how-to-manage-flights-for-unaccompanied-minors/>