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Frequent Criers

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Like many road-warriors embarking on long-haul plane trips, William Allen swaps frequent-flier miles for first-class upgrades whenever possible. In the past six years, he has flown in first-class to Asia (two times), Europe (four times) and South Africa (twice).

While reclining in the cushy seats, with his feet supported comfortably on footrests, the Raleigh, N.C., resident enjoys catching up on his reading, watching a video or two and trying his hand at writing. "I like doing Mad-Libs," says Mr. Allen, a six-year-old who will complete kindergarten next week.

PLAYDATE AT 30,000 FEET




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It isn't just first-class youngsters who are scoring perks. Many airlines are adding child-friendly features throughout the plane to make flights more fun for kids and their parents. [Here is a look at a few](#)⁰.

Meet another face of first class: It's freckled and smudged with chocolate. To the bedevilment of business travelers, more parents are moving the family to the front of the plane -- and airlines are cautiously responding with kid-friendly amenities. Virgin Atlantic Airways is featuring Nintendo videogames in promotional materials for its "Upper Class" service. American Airlines has augmented its menu in some premium cabins with chicken nuggets. Gulf Air provides free "sky nannies" who entertain children with puzzles, games and finger puppetry. "Some of the kids really like the face paint," says Michael Kent, Gulf Air's head of in-flight services and cabin crew.

But courting the littlest elite is a tricky corporate strategy. Premium cabins are where airlines cater to business travelers, whom they don't want to alienate with a bunch of unruly kids. At the same time, the industry is trying to lure a broadening tier of wealthy leisure travelers willing to pay top dollar to take the family. Major airlines don't want these customers to choose low-cost carriers known for perks like multiple kid-oriented TV channels. Another concern is that well-heeled fliers will defect to private jets -- an increasingly popular option as fractional shares are offered in more affordable units. "It's a fine line," says Virgin Atlantic spokesman Chris Rossi. Of course, kids have long flown in first class, but airlines, tour operators and flight attendants all say they see a noticeable rise. (Most airlines don't track passengers by age.) Luxury-tour operator Cox & Kings says the number of clients buying first-class tickets for family

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trips has increased to 75% from 45% in 2002. In Birmingham, Ala., Meg McGriff North, a travel-company executive, says she's booked premium tickets for six families in the last two months, nannies and all.

'Part of the Nursery Program'

Last fall, William Ihle, an Oregon retail executive who flies about 200,000 miles a year, sat next to a woman in first class who had brought along her baby. During the flight, the woman asked a perplexed Mr. Ihle, who has no children, if he wouldn't mind holding her child while she visited a friend in coach. "Twenty minutes later, she still hadn't come back," he says. "It was as though I was part of the nursery program."



When Gary Saddler and his wife cashed in 300,000 miles to fly first class from London to Barbados for their first wedding anniversary, they expected expensive Champagne and impeccable service. Instead, they got Romper Room.

Not only were they asked to sit separately to accommodate some fidgety children, they also watched a nearby diaper-change and had to listen to a baby that "cried and screamed the whole way across the Atlantic," Mr. Saddler says. After he wrote a letter of complaint last month, British Airways offered him 30,000 miles in recompense.

The airlines are particularly sensitive to the problem of unhappy customers right now -- especially in the light of current financial woes. Not only did the number of complaints to the Department of Transportation about airlines increase by 7% between March 2004 and March 2005, the biggest carriers are reporting losses totaling \$3.1 billion this year, twice as wide as last year's.

If all these kids in first class are exacerbating customer-service ratings, the airlines might have only themselves to blame. As they've tried to cut costs in recent years, dispensing with free meals in coach and even removing pillows on some planes as a way of cutting costs, they've made premium travel more alluring for families who can afford it. A first-class ticket not only jumps passengers to the front of security check lines in some cases, it also lets them board the plane first (and scores extra help from flight attendants).

Those tickets are no longer prohibitive for some families, since first-class fares on domestic routes have dropped 12% in the past year, according to travel-industry consultant Harrell Associates. What's more, by expanding the ways customers can earn frequent-flier points, airlines have left travelers so flush with miles that they're willing to upgrade the whole family. Indeed, elite fliers have 25% to 50% more miles in their accounts than five years ago, says Hal Sirkin, a senior vice president specializing in airlines at The Boston Consulting Group.

Supporting a Kid Ban

Here's the twist: These loyal fliers (the same people who complain about children when they're traveling for business) are the passengers most likely to trundle their own families into first class when they take vacations, airline executives say. New York attorney Ilan Nissan, a seasoned business traveler, says he would support a ban on children younger than age 16 in premium cabins. But on a recent family ski trip, he didn't hesitate to upgrade to first-class for his wife and children. "When I'm on duty, I find it annoying," he says. "When I'm off duty, I embrace it. Of course there's a hypocrisy to it."

To be sure, some airlines are looking for ways to set limits. Robin Urbanski, a spokeswoman for United Airlines, says the carrier hasn't taken any special steps to make children feel more welcome up front. "In first class, it's all about business travelers," she says. When Virgin arranges seating plans, says spokesman Mr. Rossi, the carrier tries to corral families with children in the center of the "upper class" cabin -- farthest from the bar in the back and the "snooze zone" upstairs toward the front of the plane. "We try to section them off," Mr. Rossi says.

And first class isn't always the best environment for children. Earlier this week, Jennifer Novak complained to the New York Post about a fellow Continental Airlines passenger who drank cocktails and talked loudly while her nine-week-old baby tried to sleep on a flight from Seattle to Newark, N.J.. The offender: Kelly Perdew, the winner of last season's "The Apprentice." Though Ms. Novak, a 32-year-old IT manager, had cheered for Mr. Perdew on the show, she changed her mind during the flight. "He was really obnoxious," says Ms. Novak, who'd traveled cross-country to introduce her son to his grandfather, a retired military official on a short leave while working in Iraq. (Brian McWilliams, a spokesman for Mr. Perdew, said his client "behaved himself professionally.")

Didn't Like Kids

While traveling with his three-year-old son in first class on a flight last month, Anthony Davi Jr., a California real-estate broker, had to fight for the same treatment as other adult passengers. While taking pre-flight drink orders, a flight attendant skipped Mr. Davi and his son, who wanted a glass of orange juice. Though Mr. Davi flagged down the flight attendant, she argued against bringing the juice because she didn't believe the boy would finish it. "I don't think she liked kids," says Mr. Davi. (The flight attendant brought the juice eventually, and the three-year-old didn't touch it.)

Some parents say they won't fly their children up front for philosophical reasons. Chip Fisher, a New York entrepreneur, says he'd rather leave his children with something to aspire to. "It's better not to show kids the highest level of living," he says.

Nonetheless, some carriers are embracing the trend wholeheartedly. American Airlines has opened four "Kids Clubs" in premium-level airport lounges since 2002, and has plans to open two more this year. The clubs have videogames, aquariums and pint-sized furniture. "We like to give the kids a little privacy," says Lauri Curtis, an airline spokeswoman.

Gulf Air, which flies throughout the Middle East, Europe and Asia, allows passengers to request

assistance from one of its staff of sky nannies, all of whom are graduates of Norland College, a nanny school in Bath, England, with a special class in caring for children in the air. While the caretakers are available to passengers in all classes, the airline says there's a higher concentration of help and supplies in premium cabins. Mr. Kent, the Gulf Air executive, says the goal is "to provide parents with some time and space."

Meanwhile, young travelers such as Mr. Allen, the jet-setting kindergartener, are becoming first-class aficionados. Though he has flown coach domestically, young Mr. Allen says he doesn't have an opinion about conditions in coach on longer-haul international flights. "We don't even go back there," he says.

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Playdate at 30,000 Feet

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AIRLINE	WHAT THEY'RE DOING	COMMENTS
British Airways	Videogames with "SuperflyerBravo" and "SuperflyerAlpha" mascots	One game, set in outer space, involves positioning mascots to catch falling planes and BA logos. "If the kids are happy, the parents have a good flight," says spokeswoman Honor Verrier, adding that 1.2 million kids flew on the airline last year, up more than 25% from five years ago.
Continental Airlines	Individual eight-channel TV sets in most planes	This month, kids can catch the Bugs Bunny film "Space Jam" and NBC sitcom "Joey," or listen to songs like "Five Little Ducks," by the Wiggles. But adult-sized earphones can be uncomfortable for little ears -- and they cost \$5.
Emirates Airline	Multicolored plastic lunch boxes	Boxes are packed with fruit juice, cookies, digital watch, mini toothbrush and stencils (plane, train, automobile). Video in-flight entertainment includes reruns of "Lizzie McGuire." There's also a special frequent-flier program for kids.
JetBlue Airways	A Hanna-Barbera network, Comedy Central, MTV, Nickelodeon; animal crackers served on-board	The airline is trying to appeal to kids outside the plane, too: It's a sponsor of "Oh, Seuss! Off to Great Places," an upcoming touring exhibition of Dr. Seuss-inspired activities. As part of marketing to families, the airline will spend \$200,000 this year on partnerships with family-friendly organizations, says a spokeswoman.

United Airlines	Baseball-type cards with stats on the airplanes	For \$5, passengers can buy a kid's snack pack with SpongeBob SquarePants Pez dispenser. A group of United's pilots (fewer than 10%) will treat unaccompanied minors to free phone calls home from seat-back telephones on the plane.
Virgin Atlantic Airways	Free Virgin-logo backpack on foreign flights originating in the U.K.	Current on-demand film options include "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban." To keep junior from tuning into material that's not for kids -- it's also showing "Bullet Boy," about London's gun culture -- there is also a "parental block" system.

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