

TRAVEL

# The Secret to Having a True Vacation, Not Just a Relocation, With Kids

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Photo: Courtesy of Mohonk Mountain House

Our recent family vacation got off to a rocky start when my 2-year-old son became inexplicably hysterical on the scenic drive outside Manhattan, refusing even my lollipop bribes. My 5-year-old daughter chimed in with a few sympathy screams and my husband compelled me to climb over the

center console and wedge myself into the backseat to restore order. Soon we were pulled over in a Denny's parking lot trying to calm them, and I began to worry that our upcoming stay at Mohonk Mountain House, a sprawling lakeside castle resort in upstate New Paltz, New York, would be so stressful, and so exhausting, I'd end up having a meltdown of my own.

What saved our sanity, though, was the kids club. Mohonk is a place so cheerfully chock full of activities that it conjured *Dirty Dancing's* fictional Kellerman, but for me, this was its most valuable amenity: the ability to drop off our demons from 9:30 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. (though it tempted me with its full day option) for pony rides, hikes, salamander hunts, feeding giant koi fish, jewelry-making and story times. On the first day, my husband and I paddle-boated in complete peace around the sparkling Lake Mohonk. Afterward, I read a book, and sipped a coffee, for almost a full hour in a rocking chair—something my kids would have never stood for. On day two, we achieved family vacation nirvana: after a messy breakfast together with no fewer than three juice spills, we delivered the kids to the club and reported to the spa for massages.

Kids' activities abound at Mohonk Photo: Courtesy of Mohonk Mountain House

"I could tell you about how kids clubs give my kids time for themselves, but, really, it's time for *myself*," says Maria Smith, a freelance writer who covers family travel with her four children at her

blog, Mamalicious Maria. "It's so that I can breathe on vacation."

It's a common refrain among parents, that trips with kids are not a vacation, but a *relocation*. After one sunny-yet-punishing family trip to Florida, my husband and I returned exhausted and swiftly booked a long, adults-only weekend to the Bahamas. But once there, of course, we missed our daughter and son. "The kids club is the happy medium to all that," says Kirsten Maxwell, author of the family travel blog, [Kids Are a Trip](#). You are technically away with your children, but in moderation.



Read on for guidance on how to choose a kids club, how drop off your children with minimal squabbling, and end up with a harmonious vacation for the whole family.

**Safety first:** Ask about the ratio of staff to children, how the club divides kids into age groups, accommodations for allergies, and plans for water safety: "If I didn't have kids who were swimmers, I wouldn't want somebody else responsible for them in the pool," Smith says. She prefers clubs run by the resorts and not outsourced: that way, you can verify that counselors are employees vetted through the appropriate channels. Before the first drop-off, visit the kids club, speak to counselors and, if traveling internationally, make sure there is a multilingual staff who will be able to communicate with your family. "It's reassuring to know your kids will be in great hands," Maxwell says.

**Manage kids club guilt:** It's practically a rite of passage for kids to protest the kids club. Seasoned family travelers suggest offering your little resister a compromise—they have to at least try a half-day—and planning a special activity together later. (While my son napped in the afternoon, my daughter and I hiked, explored and raided the old-school caramel squares in the gift shop). Usually, once they get a taste, "my kids come out of the kids club feeling like it was a good thing," Maxwell said. I noted appreciatively that both of mine were suddenly bumping into new friends at the dinner buffet.

As for your own [parental guilt](#), frame the kids club as a beneficial break for the whole family. "We've had so many vacations where I'm like, 'Why are we fighting this much? Because we're with each other all the time, 24/7,'" Smith said. "The time away makes me a better mom for when I am with them."

**Preview programming:** Call and/or check websites for detailed daily schedules. Most parents are seeking more than just a room filled with toys and video games, and hotels and resorts have noticed, offering a gauntlet of fun from cookie-baking and beach meditation (at Gurney's Resorts in Montauk, New York and Newport, R.I.) to bedtime tuck-ins from Elmo himself (at Beaches in Turks and Caicos and Negril, Jamaica). Maxwell's kids have learned Spanish at the kids club at the Hyatt Ziva in Los Cabos, Mexico and flipped for the trampolines at Portugal's Martinhal Sagres Family Resort. Smith's kids loved the Ritz-Carlton Grande Lakes in Orlando, Fla., where there are scavenger hunts, kayak eco-tours, and resident chickens to meet.

**Make a night of it:** The savviest of kids programs may also offer an evening option, allowing parents to sneak out for a dinner that does not include chicken fingers. In the summer, Mohonk's kids club extended into the evening with activities like ice cream sundae socials, twilight hikes, and dance parties. While at Beaches, Smith spent some days with the family, and took advantage of the kids club at night, with counselors "taking the kids to the Sesame Street parade that you really don't want to go to anyway." Some resorts, like Mohonk, can suggest babysitters—ours, a veteran staffer, arrived with stuffed ponies for each of my kids, who instantly fell in love with her. At the PGA National Resort and Spa in Palm Beach, the resort refers guests to Sitters in a Second, a local babysitting service.

The kids club option has nearly sold me on vacationing with my children. As much as I loved my free mornings at Mohonk, one of the best memories from our trip was sneaking out with my 5-year-old at 9 p.m.—decidedly after her bedtime—holding hands and walking around the lake for a sing-a-long and s'mores. Family vacations are a journey unto themselves.