

## **Airlines splitting up families on flights: When seat reservations are not honoured**

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- Far less can go wrong when family members sit together on a long flight – so why are airlines courting disaster Riddle me this, readers: When is a reservation not a reservation?

The answer is when you're flying with your family on almost any domestic or international flight.

Recently, a passenger named Matthew Absalom-Wong, a Fairfax employee, paid extra to select seats for his family of five on a Jetstar flight to Auckland, only to discover upon boarding that he and his three-year-old were in the second back row, while his wife, six-year-old and nine-year-old were up the front.

"The flight crew were lovely enough, saying it was absurd to split families," he says. "It's pretty hard sharing an iPad across 27 rows."

Days later, his wife received a call from Customer Service. **"They said if we'd read the fine print, we would have realised reserving seats was different from guaranteeing seats and there wasn't any refund to be had,"** Matt says. The airline eventually relented and sent them a flight voucher.

But Matt is one of many. Caroline was told to pay extra to be next to her two-year-old daughter after they were allocated seats 23F and 18C. And earlier this year, a family was kicked off a Jetstar flight from Bali to Adelaide for refusing to take their seats in different parts of the plane.

Then there were the parents whose three-year-old was seated separately on a Ryanair flight from Portugal to Liverpool; the mother whose toddler was 18 rows back on United Airlines; and the man who couldn't be with his four-year-old on Delta on a long-planned father-daughter trip.

Airlines sell premium seats – usually windows or aisles – at an additional charge, leaving children scattered throughout the middle seats. Imagine being the poor chump next to a crying child, who can't see their parents?

Now some airlines are rescinding the practice, after an outcry from passengers.

Last year, Air Canada dropped a \$40 levy – dubbed "ransom money" – charged to parents for the privilege of sitting with their children. And the FAA reauthorisation bill, recently passed by the US Senate, requires children under the age of 13 to be "in a seat adjacent to the seat of an accompanying family member over the age of 13" at no additional cost.

"Families represent one of the largest economic drivers of the travel industry," Rainer Jenss, founder of the Family Travel Association, says, "so ensuring their satisfaction isn't just the right thing to do. It makes economic sense." But it shouldn't be confined to children. How about someone travelling with an autistic adult, or a parent suffering from dementia? What are the implications for safety, in the case of an emergency? And would parents ignore evacuation procedures in desperate attempts to be with their children?

Matt has salient advice, after speaking with Jetstar staff at the gate.

"They told us it's better to check in early and NOT pre-book your seats," he says. "Odd advice from a company making coin from add-ons." Jetstar acknowledges it was "wrong" and blames "human error".

"On those rare occasions due to weight and balance, seat availability, et cetera, when we can't sit a whole family together, we will always ensure a child is seated with at least one parent," an airline spokesperson says. He recommends being on the same booking reference, with pre-purchased specific seating.

**Still, there are no guarantees when dealing with airlines which routinely split up families to make a quick buck.**