

Travel

Kids can fly high — inside the airport

Play spaces give young travelers a chance to work off some energy

By Kathleen Phalen Tomaselli
Special for USA TODAY

As more parents travel with youngsters in tow, airports increasingly are discovering the benefits of designated play areas. At least 40 now have such facilities, and more are cropping up each month.

At Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, for example, nearly 38,000 children — or 18% of passengers — pass through each day, spokeswoman Wendy Abrams says. So airports nationwide are loading up on features kids love: funky moving walkways, flashing lights and music. And relieved parents have discovered that letting kids climb on giant slabs of bacon and fried eggs, ride oversized foam cars or pretend to be pilots, ticket agents and air-traffic controllers can keep them entertained for long stretches.

"Airports are much more savvy about their customers and what they need to do to reduce stress," says Joanne Paternoster, a consultant for Maritz Research of St. Louis.

"A lot of airports are creating different zones for different customers. There are quiet areas with couches like at Starbucks. There are areas for the business travelers with work stations and wireless access. And there are areas for kids, giving them useful things to do."

The strategy worked for Russ Thomas of Little Rock, who recently returned from a trip to Moscow with his 4-year-old daughter, Nina. He describes the 30-hour trip as "a



In Minneapolis-St. Paul: Gillian Burke, 5, left, and Gannon Burke, 8, of Canton, Ga., have fun in the concourse playground during a stopover between flights. The airport built two playgrounds for \$200,000.

Photos by Todd A. Buchanan for USA TODAY

brutal weekend" made easier by play areas there and in Chicago.

"She had a blast," he says. "She could bear it with the promise of going back to the play area. I bought an American Airlines club membership to get into the lounges but never use it because she loves climbing on those pieces of plastic. Kids go crazy on them."

Play areas also provide sanity for the rest of the airport.

"These areas are not just for the kids," he says. "The business traveler is the last one who wants a kid spilling a Coke on him."

Aviation themes are popular, and

several airports have poured considerable resources into creating elaborate, customized play areas.

The play area at O'Hare ranks among favorites. Kids on the Fly, which was developed a decade ago by the Chicago Children's Museum and the Chicago Department of Aviation, has become a model for the airport play concept.

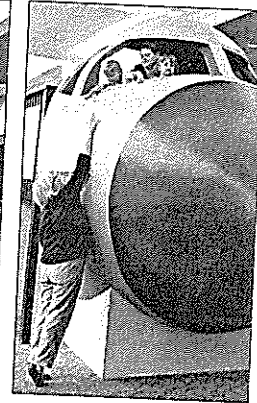
Located in Terminal 2 but closed until Nov. 3 for upgrading, the renovated area is expected to attract an additional 9,000 children, up from 227,000 a year ago. Complete with a two-story control tower, airplane with cockpit and cargo hold, lug-

gage slide and ticket counter, it helps pint-size travelers understand the air-travel experience.

At Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, two playgrounds came with a \$200,000 price tag.

The decor includes seating made to look like supersized suitcases, brightly colored hand-painted skylines of the area, and — of course — a climb-on mock airplane and air-traffic control tower.

"We didn't want a typical play area with manufactured parts, and we wanted to keep our designers local," says Jana Vaughn, executive director of the Minneapolis Met-



Flight check: Diane Buchli of St. Simons Island, Ga., in the cockpit with Zane, 2, and Annika, 1, as grandmother Ginny Corwin assists.

ropolitan Public Airport Foundation. "What we have is a work of art: custom-made airplanes and control tower made of wood and molded fiberglass."

Designer Blue Rhino Studio of Bloomington, Minn., had to follow strict building codes.

"We wanted it to be much more interactive," Vaughn says. "But due to safety concerns, we had to change many of our design ideas. There are material restrictions, height restrictions."

And some ideas were changed once kids started using the areas, such as the cockpit microphone.

When children started yelling things such as "poopy pants" throughout the airport, the live microphone option was discontinued.

"Parents need a place to relax, and the children need a place to expend energy," Vaughn says. "That's the biggest gift we can give."

Let them spread their wings here

A sampling of play areas at other airports:

- ▶ **Boston Logan International Kidport** (terminals A and C) includes the popular airplane and baggage-claim slide and a private area for nursing mothers.
- ▶ **Cleveland Hopkins International** (concourses A, C, D) has climbing mountains, playhouses and an interactive nutrition and health display (Concourse D).
- ▶ **Dallas/Fort Worth International** unveiled two Junior Flyer's Clubs (terminals B and C) over the summer. Sponsored by Pepsi, the areas feature mock runways, bridges, cars, planes and padded floors.
- ▶ **Fresno Yosemite's** only concourse has two small areas with modular play centers, rocket ship and helicopter.
- ▶ **McCarran International Las Vegas** (Concourse D, Level 2) has an interactive control tower and mock jet engine.
- ▶ **Nashville International** (concourse connector between C/D and A/B) stocks rocking chairs, Lego spaceships and play castles.
- ▶ **Philadelphia International's Please Touch Aviation Station** (adjacent to Gate D-10) teaches young pilots-in-training, using hand controls that activate a spinning propeller.
- ▶ **Salt Lake City International** (concourses A, B, E) stocks easels and chalkboards, plastic foam cars and airplanes and a Hansel and Gretel playhouse.
- ▶ **San Francisco International** (Terminal 3) boasts a color-shooting plasma wall activated by clapping hands, climbing toys and interactive exploration.
- ▶ **San Jose International's Kidport** (Terminal C main lobby) lets kids listen on special headsets to actual air traffic controllers' conversations with pilots.

By Kathleen Phalen Tomaselli