



Family-Friendly Customer Service: A Guide

As anyone who has tried it knows, travelling with small children can be incredibly stressful, whatever the mode of transport. But train travel as a family can also be extremely rewarding - young kids seem to inherently love trains, and it can make any journey just as exciting as the eventual destination. With train operators turning their attention to leisure travel post-pandemic, this is a golden opportunity to lock in the customers of the future.

Those working on the railways should be encouraged to have an awareness of the additional stress and mental load that travelling by train with babies and young children produces.

Even without any changes to an operator's policies and practices, displaying a basic level of understanding of this goes a long way to improving the travel experience for parents and carers and makes it far more likely these customers will return.

Below are some specific elements to incorporate into any customer service training to ensure that your services are as inclusive of young families as possible.

We have included case studies where those of us from the Campaign have experienced, or heard from others of, excellent examples of these behaviours in practice - and the reverse. Obviously these are not the only examples of best practice in these scenarios, but reflect our particular experience.

Booking tickets

We understand that TOCs have a limited degree of control over online ticket booking systems, so this advice mainly extends to those providing customer service in stations and at ticket offices.

- Understanding of and pro-active suggestion of money-saving options, e.g. Family Railcard or particular saving schemes for families, as well as awareness of the different ticketing requirements at the point of crossing in or out of Wales or Scotland to England - for example, children can travel for free off-peak with an accompanying adult on Transport for Wales services, regardless of whether or not they are starting and/or ending their journey in Wales. Staff at stations managed by other operators should be aware of this and be able to advise parents not to buy a ticket for their child.

- Pro-active suggestion of ways to ensure families are able to sit together.
- When reserving seats, understanding families may prefer to be near toilets and/or wheelchair or bike areas for potential buggy storage if those facilities are not being used, as well as luggage storage to make boarding and disembarking easier. Also understand that parents are unlikely to want to be in the Quiet Carriage - but online booking services do not currently provide an option to indicate this, and they may appreciate being offered alternative seats.
- Awareness of additional factors affecting those travelling with children that may make the default option less suitable and require alternative or creative suggestions, which can include, but are not limited to:
 - the need to use stations with step-free access, particularly if platform changes are required (& up to date knowledge about whether lifts are in service or out of order);
 - additional time might be needed to allow for changing trains during a journey;
 - understanding whether particular services are more or less busy, which may have an impact on buggy storage and/or families' ability to sit together - they may prefer to wait and get a later, less busy train even if it makes the connection longer;
 - understanding whether passenger assistance is available to families and how to access it;
 - where possible, understanding whether particular station or on board facilities are available or out of order, e.g. toilets (there is nothing like having planned to take a newly toilet-trained toddler to use a station toilet and then discovering it's locked!) or food services.

At the station

Step-free access:

- Staff should be aware that those travelling with babies and young children are likely to want to use a lift where available, and point them towards this facility where possible.
- Staff should pro-actively let families know if the lift is out of service and, where possible, offer to provide assistance in other ways while remaining aware of safeguarding concerns e.g. helping to carry a buggy or staying with a buggy while a

parent carries luggage up or down stairs. Families travelling should not be forced to rely on the goodwill of members of the public.

- **Case study:** this is a frequent problem and one all members of the campaign group have faced at one time or another. However, the worst example of customer service was when one of us was at a station with a toddler in a buggy while visibly pregnant (and wearing a baby on board badge) - the lift was out of service and a member of station staff who was directing everyone away from it simply told her she'd need to carry the buggy up the stairs without offering any help. Another member of the campaign had a far more positive experience at a different station in a similar circumstance - a member of staff offered to carry the buggy down the escalator while she carried her daughter.

Ticket barriers and gates:

- Staff should be aware that families travelling with young children and/or buggies will usually need to use the wide access gates, which are in limited supply in many stations.
- There can often be queues around these gates of those who don't need to use them seeking assistance - where possible, staff should seek to reduce congestion and point those able to use regular gates towards those.
- It can be difficult for those travelling with children, particularly multiple children, to navigate the process of scanning or inserting a ticket (sometimes having a buggy means it is difficult to get close enough to the ticket reader without being too close for the barrier to open) and then getting through the barrier in time before it closes. Staff should be aware of this potential issue and seek to provide assistance if necessary.

Boarding and disembarking:

- Operators should consider offering their formal Passenger Assist service to families travelling with young children - and even without making a formal offer consider allowing them access to the platform or train early to ensure they are able to board quickly without causing delays for other passengers.
- **Case study:** members of the Campaign have been particularly impressed with Avanti's Passenger Assist. Although not advertised as being available to families (which we would be keen to see changed), many of us have been able to turn up at Euston and make use of it. This has allowed for stress-free boarding experiences, including when travelling solo as a parent with two small children, and also made life easier for other passengers - since early

boarding means it's easier to fold and stow buggies without holding up others trying to enter the carriage.

- When travelling with small children, sometimes with luggage as well, it is much more difficult to sprint down a platform if it turns out the carriage with your reserved seats is at the opposite end of the train to what you'd thought. Staff should, where possible, be aware of the order of a service's carriages so they can point families towards where to stand on the platform - this will significantly reduce stress when boarding.
 - **Case study:** one of us had an unhelpful experience of this with a GWR member of staff and was told the train was the opposite way round to what it was - leading to her and her partner having to run down to the other end of the train with a buggy and suitcases.
- Some train stations can have large gaps between the train and platform, or a number of steps, which can be challenging to navigate with a buggy, luggage and/or holding the hands of small children. If this affects a particular station, staff should actively look for families affected and provide assistance where possible, perhaps by offering to lift a buggy on or off.
 - **Case study:** a member of the campaign had a positive experience on LNER when travelling solo with a toddler and luggage - a guard held her toddler's reins to allow her to fold her buggy, and carried it on and off the train for her so she could carry the toddler down the step and over a large gap.
- Staff should be taught the best way to disembark from a train with a buggy - on most models, if there are no extra steps to climb down, this is by coming off backwards - so they can provide advice and/or assistance to those doing this for the first time. For many people this is not intuitive and they may be unaware that this is far safer and easier than trying to disembark forwards. We would suggest giving staff brief practical experience of trying to do this would demonstrate how challenging this can be!
 - **Case study:** many of us have had to talk new parents through doing this when we have seen someone worried about how to get off the train. For every person we have been able to advise there will be someone else who is unsure and finds the experience terrifying, particularly if there is a large gap and they try to disembark forwards - while this may seem minor it can be incredibly scary if you are making one of your first journeys out with a young baby and may put you off travelling by train for a while.

On board

How staff are able to respond to some common issues raised by families travelling by train (e.g. where can I leave my buggy up?) will, of course, depend on individual TOC policies. However, there are some general points that it is helpful for all staff to bear in mind,

particularly when it comes to delays, cancellations and other unforeseen issues with a journey.

Storage of buggies and luggage:

- Staff should understand their operator's policies - the Conditions of Carriage state only that buggies must be "foldable": it may be an operator's specific policy that a buggy must be folded or that unfolded buggies are permitted in wheelchair spaces if not required for a wheelchair, but this information must be given to passengers accurately.
- Staff should understand why being asked to fold a buggy is challenging for parents and carers:
 - a baby may be sleeping (sometimes after much effort!);
 - they may have multiple children with them;
 - they may be by themselves and/or also have luggage with them;
 - the medical evidence overwhelmingly suggests that young babies should lie flat the majority of the time (e.g. in a pram bassinet rather than in a car seat position);
 - their buggy, even when folded, will not fit in the luggage rack (even those that are very small and designed for urban travel take up a surprising amount of space when folded in often-inadequate train luggage storage);
 - If they have recently given birth they may be unable to put a buggy or luggage in overhead storage by themselves for medical reasons;
 - with all these logistical issues they can't see where to put their baby in order to fold their buggy and are sometimes faced with the choice of putting a young baby on the floor of a train or handing them to a stranger in order to carry this out. Understandably, this can be stressful and upsetting for parents, even those who are experienced travellers.
- **Most parents are not being obstructive but just require some sympathy and/or an offer of assistance if folding their buggy is necessary** - a practical exercise in training will be a helpful tool to show just how difficult this is!
- If parents and carers are able to leave buggies in wheelchair or bicycle-priority spaces, staff should understand that they will likely appreciate being made aware as soon as possible of a wheelchair or bike boarding the train - most people do not want to be obstructive and worry about inadvertently being so because they just aren't aware of needing to move their buggy soon enough!
- **Case study:** one of our campaign members had a particularly positive experience with an East Midlands Railway member of staff, who helped her locate where the carriage with the wheelchair space (unused) would be on the train, and when the doors opened got on herself to make sure people inside the train made space for the buggy. This made a huge difference in a stressful journey travelling solo with a baby and young child.

Changing facilities:

- staff should be aware of the number of baby changing facilities on board the train and where these are, as well as whether they are out of service or not, so they can provide guidance to passengers.
- In addition, staff should be aware of the logistical nightmare that it can be changing a baby, particularly if the parent also wishes to use the toilet themselves - on many long-distance services, particularly GWR and LNER, while all toilets have changing facilities the changing table comes down over the toilet, making it impossible to secure a baby and go to the toilet if you are travelling by yourself. In this scenario, parents may appreciate assistance.

Feeding:

- Staff should be aware that the right to breastfeed in public is protected by law and ensure that no parent feels uncomfortable doing this on train services - in particular those with very young babies may be unused to this and concerned about their privacy on a busy service, particularly when juggling a hungry baby and the need to ensure they get off the train in time with all their luggage.
- Parents should be able to feed babies in comfort, whether they are breastfeeding or bottle feeding, and staff should seek to ensure a seat is made available to a parent trying to feed a baby on busy or crowded services - when babies are hungry, they are hungry, and there isn't much a parent can do about that other than feed them as soon as possible.
 - **Case study:** one of our Campaign team was forced on a busy Avanti service to sit on the floor to breastfeed her baby as no seat was made available for her. This is unacceptable.
- If an on-board cafe is able to facilitate the warming of milk for babies, staff should be aware of this so they can pro-actively offer this to parents.

Troubleshooting difficulties:

- Operators should consider having a "family emergencies" box on board containing a few spare nappies and baby wipes so this can be signposted to parents and carers in the event of delays or unexpected nappy blowouts.
- While obviously all passengers are inconvenienced in the event of delays or cancellations, this can be additionally stressful for those travelling with babies and

young children because, for example, it can mean services and connections are busier than normal (with a knock-on effect on buggy/luggage storage and families being able to sit together) and the potential for extended journey times can potentially lead to tired, restless and hungry children.

- Staff should be aware that families may be particularly inconvenienced by some details such as it only being possible to disembark at a particular station if you are in particular carriages - there is not only the logistical issue of needing to move carriages with small children and luggage, but most buggies will not fit down the aisle of a carriage, leaving families stuck and unable to disembark if they have ended up in the wrong carriage.
 - **Case study:** a member of the public got in touch with the Campaign after having had this experience on a Greater Anglia service: the fact she needed to be in a particular carriage was only flagged on board after the train had left the previous stop, and she was unable to disembark at the station she wanted to because her buggy (a small, lightweight one often recommended by operators for use on public transport) did not fit down the aisle of the train.
- Staff should be aware of the additional needs that families may have in the event of delays on board - e.g. pregnant or breastfeeding women in particular have an increased need for water and may require more than the standard offering to all passengers.
 - **Case study:** a Campaign member's relative was on an extremely delayed Southern service stuck outside a station when in the third trimester of pregnancy. The guard made sure she was given two bottles of water rather than the usual one, to ensure she was able to stay hydrated - this was much appreciated - and given additional assistance when passengers needed to disembark from the train in an unconventional way.
- Staff should be aware of the additional factors that may affect a family's ability to make the standard suggested alterations to their journey - for example, step-free access, time to change platforms, and the ability to sit together or store buggies or an alternative service. Staff should be sympathetic to this and work to find alternatives where possible.
- In extreme delays where an alternative connection is not possible, staff should be aware that families may not be (in fact, are probably not) travelling with car seats for their children - and this will have a significant impact on their ability to, for example, simply take a taxi instead.

Child-friendly perks:

- young passengers always enjoy being offered something like their own ticket to be stamped or a colouring set - a small gesture that can make a big difference to someone's journey and set them up as a return passenger for the future!
 - **Case study:** we have heard time and time again as a campaign group about the positive impact of the tickets offered by Northern to children (who usually will not have tickets of their own). Taking this even further are the toys on offer with a child ticket on ICE services in Germany, which can make a train-mad child's day!

Online/social media

Social media is often where families turn when they have questions about their journey or aren't happy with the service they have received. **Given that often this is the only direct interaction many customers will have with a representative of the train operator, providing a family-friendly service here is vital too and we recommend that any customer service training reflects this.**

We frequently have online posts flagged to us that provide inaccurate information and/or are written in a tone that does not acknowledge the difficulties of travelling by train with babies and children, creating animosity as a result. As above, an understanding of and showing sympathy for the additional complexities of travelling as a family is vital, as well as providing accurate and up-to-date information that can make life for these families easier. If this is not prioritised, operators will find that they lose families to making these journeys by car instead.

Many operators have pages on their websites offering tips for those travelling with children. This is very welcome, however it is important to remember that the majority of families travelling are unlikely to have read these pages so this knowledge should not be assumed.

That said, we would suggest the below as some of the information operators should feature on these pages:

- signposting relevant discounts, such as the Family & Friends Railcard;
- stating whether or not the operator offers Passenger Assist to families and, if so, how this is accessed;
- a video showing how to safely disembark from a train when using a buggy;

- **Case study:** ScotRail's video showing how to do this is particularly helpful and one we frequently use as an example.
- providing necessary links so passengers can determine whether step-free access is available at their departure or arrival station, and what other facilities (e.g. baby changing) are available;
- clear information on what parents and carers need to do with a buggy - whether it needs to be folded, where it can be stored, etc;
- where possible, diagrams of train models operating on main routes so parents can use these to determine where it's best to reserve seats (e.g. near toilets, not in the Quiet Carriage).