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7 airlines halve fares for infants

By Donna Rosato
USA TODAY

Seven airlines will sell halfprice fares for children 2 and under, giving parents an incentive to buy separate seats for children rather than holding onto them in flight.

"Children are much safer in safety seats," said American Airlines executive vice president Bob Baker, whose airline was first to announce infant fares Wednesday.

United, Delta, Continental, Northwest, TWA and Canadian Airlines International will match the fares. Southwest Airlines already sells infant fares.

American said it's likely to gain revenue. Two million children 2 and under fly annually.

Coming at the start of the summer vacation season, the move revives an eight-year-old debate about whether small children are safe riding planes seated on adults' laps.

Airlines now let fliers hold toddlers on their laps or use an empty seat. But flights are 70% full on average and many are sold out. Less than 5% of children 2 and under have separate seats bought for them.

The Federal Aviation Administration has hesitated to order separate seats, fearing that more families would

drive instead of fly. Such a rule could result in more child deaths than it would save because flying is safer than driving.

From 1978-94, nine children under 2 died in plane accidents. Five would have lived if they had been in child seats, the FAA says.

During the same period, four infants suffered major injuries and eight had minor injuries. Ten of those injuries might have been prevented if child seats were used.

The infant fare is good on all domestic and U.S.-Canada flights and all published fares.

People flying on a free frequent-flier ticket can get an infant discount at the lowest fare available on the day they buy the ticket. Those who buy the infant discounts must provide their own child safety seats.

"American has opened the door. I'd like to see less restrictions and steeper discounts," says Rep. Peter DeFazio, D.Ore., who sponsored a bill in March that would require child safety seats. A similar bill is pending in the Senate.