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Story Time

Family-friendly podcasts keep kids entertained while traveling. BY SUSAN B. BARNES

Listen Up:

Podcasts entertain kids and inspire their imagination.

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When it comes to traveling with kids, there are seemingly endless options to keep them entertained on the journey, including downloading videos to watch and playing on hand-held game consoles.

Classic road trip games like [the alphabet game](#) and [license plate game](#) still offer fun and can easily pass hours in the car.

Kid-friendly podcasts provide another way to keep kids amused during their travels; many can entertain the entire family, too.

According to [Listen Notes](#), a search engine for podcasts, at least 3 million podcasts are available around the world; of those, nearly

81,000 fall into the kids and family category.

The “No. 1 podcast for kids and their grown-ups” is [Wow in the World](#), featuring stories about the latest news in science, technology and innovation, hosted by Guy Raz and Mindy Thomas. Also popular, [Greeking Out](#) from *National Geographic Kids* retells classic Ancient Greek myths in a kid-friendly format, while [Radiolab for Kids Presents: Terrestrials](#) from WNYC “uncovers the strangeness right here on Earth.”

More than 50 years ago, WGBH out of Boston began creating and producing children’s programming with the premiere of *ZOOM*,

the first-ever show for kids, by kids. Over the decades, the studio produced the first animated series for PBS, *Arthur!* and the first nationally distributed series with an Alaska Native lead with *Molly of Denali*, which premiered in July 2019.

Dorothea Gillim, creative director and executive producer of *Molly* at WGBH, was inspired by her childhood memories of a Wegmans grocery store in western New York. Working with senior producer Kathy Waugh, the two developed the Alaska-based show with a female lead character to serve as a role model for all kids.

“In deciding to have the series highlight Alaska Native culture, we understood it was not our story to tell,” Gillim said. “We reached out to members of the Alaska Native community who graciously agreed to be our collaborators to ensure that we were accurately portraying their culture. The characters and the fictional village of Qyah, Molly’s home, were developed through many conversations with our Alaska Native collaborators.”

As a result of the collaboration, Gillim says all aspects of the production involve Alaska Native and indigenous voices, both on screen and behind the scenes. An indigenous actor voices every indigenous character, including Molly, voiced by Alaska Native Sovereign Bill (of Tlingit and Muckleshoot descent). Phillip Blanchett and Karina Moeller of the Yup’ik sing Molly’s theme song, accompanied by Alaska Native band Pamyua, with Gwich’in musician Brennan Firth playing the Athabascan fiddle and traditional drum.

Circle Round, produced by WBUR and hosted by Rebecca Sheir, celebrated its 200th episode in March. The podcast was envisioned by then-producer Jessica Alpert, who had a long-held dream to make WBUR’s first-ever child-focused program. Alpert reached out to Sheir, who had been a reporter and host at various NPR member stations, and her husband, Eric Shimelonis, a composer and sound designer.

“We decided on a concept: We would thoughtfully adapt folktales from around the world as old-fashioned radio plays for modern audiences,” said Sheir. “We would have a warm, engaging host; dramatic, compelling scripts; sophisticated sound design and original music; plus beloved voices from the stage and screen playing the leading roles.

“Our pilot episode was adapted from a Yiddish folktale I remembered hearing in a rabbi’s sermon when I was a girl: the story of a man who thinks his house is too crowded with his big, noisy family until a wise elder gives him some much-needed perspective,” Sheir continued. “We worked up the script, we nabbed the amazing Jason Alexander to play our lead, Eric wrote a beautiful score, and it was a hit!”



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— MICK SULLIVAN

That first show aired in June 2017, and the first *Circle Round* season launched in September 2017. Six years in, the podcast has featured hundreds of celebrity guest stars like Mario Cantone, Lisa Loeb and Billy Porter, in addition to Alexander, and reaches listeners in more than 160 countries.

“We like to say that *Circle Round* is geared toward listeners ages 3–103,” said Sheir. “We hope that whether you’re young or young at heart, you’ll be enchanted by the stories we tell.”

Podcasts are produced in studios both big and small. In 2016

Teamwork:
Molly of Denali
characters

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Spellbound:

Podcasts can keep the youngest of children occupied on a flight.

PHOTO: © VLADIMIR SURKOV | DREAMSTIME.COM

Mick Sullivan created [The Past and The Curious](#), a history podcast for kids and families which he hosts from his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. Sullivan says he created the podcast because at the time there wasn't a history show in the kid space.

"As a musician, museum educator and history enthusiast, I thought I was in a good place to write, develop and produce something to fill the gap," he said. "I'm glad I did when I did because it's a growing scene.

"I love being excited about learning, I value the past, and I try to pass that on. I also love the idea of kids and parents learning and laughing together, so I wanted to be an aid for that. As it's gone on, I've realized that there are kids that need this, and I'm happy I can provide it."

Created with third to sixth graders in mind, Sullivan hears from listeners that kids as young as kindergarten enjoy the show, too.

"I want families to enjoy this together, so I design it to work on several levels," he said. "That's the most rewarding feedback I get, 'We all love listening!'"

Sullivan is also the cochair of [Kids Listen](#), an international children's audio advocacy group and the platform where you can find the [Dream Big Podcast](#). Hosted by eighth grader Eva and second grader Sophia along with their mom, Olga, [Dream Big](#) aims to inspire kids and adults to pursue their passions and make their dreams reality.

Bill Childs was inspired to launch [Spare the Rock, Spoil the Child | indie music for indie kids](#) when he and his family moved to Western Massachusetts in the early 2000s; his kids were in preschool and kindergarten at the time. Looking to become involved in his new community, Childs saw a flyer from a local community radio station seeking programmers.

"I combined my long-time interest in radio with our recent discovery of interesting music for families and made the pitch," recalled Childs. "The station accepted it, and it's just grown from there."

[Spare](#) debuted in August 2005, and nearly 20 years in, Childs estimates he's produced more than 900 episodes. His kids are now in college and graduate school, but the show must go on and is created for kids ages 3–9.

"We have a lot of listeners who don't have kids at all or whose kids have aged out," said Childs, who now lives in Minnesota. "I try to keep it fun and appealing to anyone, with or without kids."

In addition to kid-specific podcasts, you may find your kids enjoy what you're already listening to, too, regardless of their ages.

"My kids actually love the podcasts for adults, like [The Moth](#) and [This American Life](#)," said [Elisa Parhad](#), a Los Angeles-based children's book author whose kids are 9 and 13 years old. "We listened to [The Dropout](#) and one about a crypto currency mystery called [Exit Scam](#). I'm also a big [How I Built This](#) fan, so they get to hear that sometimes, too."

Parhad added that when her kids were younger, they "loved the soft-spoken, carefully curated" [Sparkle Stories](#), which she said had a [Little House on the Prairie](#) feel. There are currently more than 1,400 original [Sparkle Stories](#), produced for kids ages 3–9.

Discover more kid-friendly podcasts through [Saturday Morning Media](#), [Wondery](#) and [Gen-Z Media](#).