

By ELLIOTT HESTER

AUG. 1, 2019

Every airline passenger knows (or should know) to use headphones when listening to audio from a personal electronic device. No one wants to hear unsolicited music or movie dialogue blasting from a stranger's cellphone, tablet or laptop computer while they're crammed into a seat in the vicinity of an aural offender.

But when someone lives in It's-All-About-Me World and chooses to broadcast personal-device audio as if no one else exists, passengers expect flight attendants to put a stop to it.

Airline policy states that passengers must use headphones when listening to audio from electronic devices. Without such a policy, a typical flight would descend into chaos. Imagine sitting in a center seat in coach. The passenger on your left is watching an epic war film, and the battle sounds, played at full volume, are like grenade explosions inside your head. The teenager on your right is bouncing to the beat of a pop tune sung by a diva with a piercing voice. Hip-hop, metal and country/western battle for supremacy across the aisle, while horror and action movies fill the cabin with earsplitting screams and screeching car chases.

At 30,000 feet, you might be tempted to open an emergency exit and jump.

As a flight attendant, I'm required to approach noncompliant passengers and discreetly remind them of our headphone policy. Most offenders comply immediately. That person might look around at the bevy of swiveling heads, realizing that if looks could kill, he or she might truly be at their final destination.

If the passenger doesn't own a set of headphones, I'll offer airline-issued headphones which they'll plug in — albeit reluctantly. Fellow passengers stop seething. The tension eases. The plane flies on.

But every so often, flight attendants come face to face with someone who feels that, for whatever reason, the headphone rule doesn't apply to them. In my more than 30 years of experience, the most common perpetrators are mothers traveling with small children. Not all mothers. Not most mothers. Only a certain few.

As I walked down the aisle on one flight, I noticed that several passengers were giving me eye signals that suggested desperation. Why? The soundtrack from an animated cartoon was blaring. I couldn't tell you whether it was Barney, Sponge Bob or Dora the Explorer, but it was clear from the squeaky-voice dialogue and bouncy tunes that this was kid stuff.

As I walked farther down the aisle, the sound grew louder. A few rows later, I noticed a woman beaming at a small child who was watching a cartoon on a pink video player. The woman looked up as I leaned toward her.

In a whisper, I said, "If you don't have headphones, we'll be happy to provide them."

"Oh," she replied nonchalantly, "My daughter doesn't like to wear headphones."

Because your daughter doesn't like to wear headphones, everyone on the airplane has to listen to cartoon sing-alongs for the next three hours? Seriously?

That's what I wanted to say. Instead, I explained that regardless of her daughter's predilections, the drifting audio was disturbing other passengers.

"No one complained to me," she replied. And she was right. No one had complained to her. Most people are unwilling to confront an aural offender in a restaurant, on a bus or on an airplane. Most of us just sit there, stewing in our own indignation, rather than saying: "Excuse me. The sound from your electronic device is annoying. Could you please use your headphones?"

Part of a flight attendant's job is to do just that. In so doing, we often end up being the bad guys. Meanies are employed to tell anyone — including a precious 5-year-old — that they can't always do what they want to do because, in a confined space at 30,000 feet, irritated passengers can't leave the room.

But this particular mom seemed oblivious to anyone's comfort. That is, anyone's comfort except her daughter's. So she argued.

She said headphones made her daughter uncomfortable.

I said the sound blaring from your daughter's video player makes passengers uncomfortable.

She said the flight attendants let us play the video without headphones on our previous flight.

I said the flight attendants on your previous flight weren't doing their jobs.

Finally, she gave up. She snapped off the video player and told her startled daughter, "The flight attendant says you can't watch the video."

"That's not fair," said the little girl, scissor-kicking her legs in anger like ... well, like a 5-year-old.

The kid was right. It's not fair. In fact, life's not fair. And like the rest of us, she'll learn that lesson. Then maybe, just maybe she'll learn to like using headphones on an airplane.