

Southwest Airlines Age Limit To Travel

Direct answer: On Southwest Airlines, children **aged 5 to 11** travelling without an adult **must** be booked as Unaccompanied Minors, at a fee of **\$100 each way**. Children **under 5 cannot fly alone**. From **age 12**, Southwest treats children as **Young Travelers** — they fly as ordinary passengers without the paid service and without the routing restrictions.

Two features distinguish Southwest from the other major carriers. The **age threshold drops to 12**, which is meaningfully younger than the 15 used by United and Delta — a 13-year-old who would need paid supervision on United flies free of it on Southwest. But the **routing rule is strict**: unaccompanied minors may travel only on **nonstop or direct flights with no plane change**.

That routing rule decides whether the trip is possible at all. **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can check which qualifying nonstops exist from your airport.

The age bands

Age	Can they fly alone?	Service required	Routing permitted
Under 5	No	Not available	None
5 to 11	Yes	Unaccompanied Minor, mandatory	Nonstop or direct only, no plane change
12 to 17	Yes, as a Young Traveler	None required	No restriction
18 and over	Yes, as an adult	Not applicable	No restriction

A child aged 5 to 11 is exempt only if accompanied by someone aged 12 or over on the same flight — Southwest's accompanying-passenger threshold is lower than the 18 used by Delta and United.

The fee

\$100 each way, on top of the child's fare. A round trip is \$200.

That is the **lowest unaccompanied minor fee among the major U.S. carriers** — Delta, United and American each charge \$150 each way. Combined with the lower age threshold, Southwest is materially cheaper for families sending children alone, provided a qualifying nonstop exists.

What the fee covers: additional supervision from check-in through to the arrival gate, escorted boarding and disembarking, and a documented handover to the designated adult.

The nonstop or direct rule

Unaccompanied Minors on Southwest may travel only on nonstop or direct flights.

The distinction between those two words matters, and it works in your favour:

- A **nonstop** flight goes from A to B without stopping.
- A **direct** flight may stop somewhere en route, but **the child stays on the same aircraft** and does not change planes.

Southwest's point-to-point network includes a fair number of direct flights with intermediate stops, so the qualifying options are sometimes broader than a nonstop-only search suggests. Ask specifically about direct flights, not just nonstops.

What is not permitted is a **connection requiring a change of aircraft**, at any age within the programme.

If no qualifying flight exists on your route, the realistic options are driving the child to an airport that has one, using an airline that permits connections for unaccompanied minors — Delta allows them for ages 8 to 14 — or having an adult travel with them.

Young Travelers, ages 12 to 17

From their twelfth birthday, a child may fly Southwest alone as a **Young Traveler**. No fee, no paid service, no routing restriction — they may take connecting flights like any adult passenger.

Southwest does not supervise Young Travelers. The expectation is that they can manage check-in, security, locating the gate, boarding, any connection, and collecting baggage independently.

That is a genuine responsibility, and the right decision depends on the individual child rather than the birthday. A cautious 12-year-old on a first solo trip through a busy connecting airport is a different proposition from a seasoned 15-year-old on a nonstop.

Unlike Delta and United, Southwest does **not** offer an optional paid supervision service for this age group. It is unaccompanied minor service up to 11, and independent travel from 12. There is no middle option.

Booking the service

- 1 **Confirm a qualifying nonstop or direct flight** exists on your route and date. Everything depends on this.
- 2 **Contact Southwest to book.** Unaccompanied minor arrangements require the details to be recorded properly rather than booked as an ordinary ticket.
- 3 **Provide the child's** full legal name and date of birth.
- 4 **Provide the drop-off adult's** full name, address, phone numbers and relationship to the child.
- 5 **Provide the pickup adult's** details in the same form.
- 6 **Pay the fare and the \$100 fee** per direction.
- 7 **Verify the confirmation shows the unaccompanied minor service**, not merely a child's age.

That last step is the one that fails silently and costs the most. A ticket booked with a child's date of birth but without the service attached will not be accepted at check-in.

Information to have ready

- Child's full legal name and date of birth
- Drop-off adult: name, address, mobile and alternate phone
- Pickup adult: name, address, mobile and alternate phone
- A secondary emergency contact not travelling
- Government-issued photo identification for both adults at the airport

Southwest will not release a child to anyone not named on the reservation, regardless of family relationship. If the pickup person changes, update the booking before the flight.

What happens on the day

At departure. Arrive early — at least two hours for a domestic flight. Check in at the **ticket counter**, not online; the paperwork must be completed in person. A gate pass is issued to the drop-off adult so they can accompany the child through security to the gate.

The drop-off adult must remain at the airport until the aircraft has departed. Not until boarding — until it is airborne. If the flight returns to the gate or is cancelled, the child must be collected. Park rather than using curbside drop-off, and plan for a wait.

Onboard. The child boards early and is introduced to the cabin crew, who monitor them through the flight. Under Southwest's assigned seating system, introduced in January 2026, the child has a designated seat rather than choosing one at boarding — which removes one of the old uncertainties of the open seating era.

On arrival. The child remains on board until other passengers have disembarked, then a Southwest employee escorts them to the designated adult, who must show photo identification.

Preparing the child

Pack a bag they can manage alone — one they can lift, open and close unaided. Medication, a change of clothes, a charged device with headphones, a book, snacks and a refillable water bottle.

Write contact details on paper and put the card in a pocket. Phones lose charge. Both adults' names and numbers plus the flight number cost nothing and solve the worst case.

Walk through the sequence in advance — who they will meet, that a Southwest employee stays with them, that the pickup adult needs identification. Children cope far better when nothing is a surprise.

Name the delay scenario explicitly. Tell them what happens if the flight is late: they stay with Southwest staff, the pickup adult is contacted, nobody is leaving them anywhere. This is the fear that actually causes anxiety, and saying it aloud defuses it.

Feed them beforehand. Southwest's onboard catering on a short flight is minimal.

Things to know that are specific to Southwest

Unaccompanied minors cannot travel with a pet. Southwest's pet policy requires an adult.

Bags are no longer free. Since 28 May 2025, checked bags cost \$45 for the first and \$55 for the second. A child travelling alone with a suitcase now has a cost attached that did not exist previously. The free carry-on and personal item remain, however, and for most children's trips a carry-on is sufficient.

Seats are assigned. Since 27 January 2026 the child has a specific seat, which is an improvement on the open seating era where an unaccompanied child could end up anywhere.

Common problems

Booking without the service attached. The most frequent and most costly error.

No qualifying nonstop or direct flight. Discovered late, this can end the plan.

Assuming a connection is allowed. It is not, at any age within the programme.

Pickup person changed without updating the reservation. Southwest will not release the child.

Booking the last flight of the day. A cancellation then leaves a child with nowhere to go. Morning departures also have better rebooking options.

Forgetting that 12 is the threshold. Parents used to other airlines sometimes pay for a service Southwest does not require.

Costs beyond the fee

The \$100 each way is the lowest headline figure among the major carriers, but a few other costs deserve budgeting.

The routing restriction can force a pricier ticket. If the only qualifying nonstop or direct flight departs on an expensive day or from a further airport, that constraint costs more than the fee itself. Families outside cities with direct Southwest service face driving to a larger airport, with fuel, time and possibly a hotel attached.

Parking at both ends. The drop-off adult must remain at the airport until the aircraft is airborne, so curbside drop-off is not an option. On a delayed departure that becomes a long and expensive wait.

Checked bags now cost money. Since 28 May 2025 the first checked bag is \$45. For a child travelling alone this is a genuine new expense that did not exist before. The free carry-on and personal item remain on every fare, and for most children's trips a carry-on is entirely sufficient — worth planning around deliberately.

Compare against an adult ticket. Two one-way fees total \$200. On short competitive routes, buying an adult a round-trip ticket to accompany the child sometimes costs less than that, particularly if the adult can use points. Price it before assuming the unaccompanied minor service is the economical choice.

How Southwest compares with other airlines

Useful context, because the differences are large and cut both ways.

Airline	Mandatory ages	Fee each way	Independent from age
Southwest	5–11	\$100	12
Delta	5–14	\$150 (covers up to 4 children)	15
United	5–14	\$150 (covers up to 2 children)	15
American	5–14	\$150	15

Southwest is the cheapest and the earliest to grant independence. For a family with a 12-, 13- or 14-year-old, the difference is stark: that child flies as an ordinary passenger on Southwest and requires \$150 each way of paid supervision on the other three.

But Southwest's routing rule is the strictest in one respect and the most lenient in another. It permits no plane change at any age within the programme, where Delta allows connections for ages 8 to 14. Yet Southwest's acceptance of **direct flights with intermediate stops** — where the child stays aboard — opens routings that a pure nonstop-only rule would exclude, and Southwest's point-to-point network has more of these than its competitors.

Southwest also has no optional service for teenagers. Delta and United will supervise a 15- to 17-year-old for a fee if parents want it. Southwest will not; from 12 the child is on their own.

The practical summary: if a qualifying Southwest flight exists on your route and your child is 12 or over, Southwest is comfortably the cheapest option. If your child is under 12 and the route requires a plane change, another airline may be the only one that can carry them.

Where to get help

Contact	Number	Best for
Travel reservations and unaccompanied minor bookings	1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)	Finding qualifying nonstop or direct flights, comparing airlines when no Southwest option exists, confirming the service is attached
Southwest Airlines Reservations	Published on southwest.com	Adding or amending unaccompanied minor service, updating pickup contacts

Contact	Number	Best for
Southwest accessibility desk	Published on southwest.com	Children with medical or additional needs

Frequently asked questions

What age can a child fly alone on Southwest Airlines? From age 5, with mandatory Unaccompanied Minor service through age 11. From 12 they fly as Young Travelers without the service. Under 5 may not fly alone.

How much is Southwest's unaccompanied minor fee? \$100 each way — the lowest among the major U.S. carriers.

Can a Southwest unaccompanied minor take a connecting flight? No. Only nonstop or direct flights where the child does not change aircraft.

What is the difference between nonstop and direct on Southwest? A nonstop does not stop at all. A direct flight may stop en route, but the child stays on the same aircraft. Both qualify.

Can a 12-year-old fly alone on Southwest? Yes, as a Young Traveler, with no fee and no routing restriction. Southwest does not supervise Young Travelers.

Does Southwest offer optional supervision for teenagers? No. Unlike Delta and United, there is no optional paid service for ages 12 to 17.

Who counts as an accompanying passenger? Someone aged 12 or over travelling on the same flight — a lower threshold than the 18 used by several competitors.

Can an unaccompanied minor bring a pet? No. Southwest requires an adult to accompany a pet.

Can someone else collect the child? Only if named on the reservation. Update it in advance.

Are checked bags free for an unaccompanied minor? No. Southwest ended free checked bags in May 2025. The free carry-on and personal item remain.

The takeaway

Southwest's age rules are the most family-friendly among the major carriers in two respects: the fee is **\$100 each way** rather than \$150, and independence begins at **12** rather than 15. For a family with a 12- or 13-year-old, that combination can save several hundred dollars against a competing airline.

The limitation is routing. Unaccompanied minors may only fly **nonstop or direct with no plane change**, which decides whether the trip works from your airport. Ask specifically about direct flights with intermediate stops — Southwest's point-to-point network has more of them than most, and they qualify.

Verify the service appears on the confirmation, name the pickup adult correctly and early, and choose a morning departure over the last flight of the day.

To find out whether a qualifying nonstop or direct flight exists on your route — or what the alternatives are if it does not — **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can check in one call.