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How Much Can You Fit In Your Car?

Katherine Whitehead souped up her car into a kitchen, dining room, living room, study and locker room.

“We’re in the car so much,” says the stay-at-home mother in Richmond, Va. of her daily, three-hour trips transporting her 8-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter to and from school, sports practices and music lessons.

So, Ms. Whitehead stocked the center storage unit of her Toyota Highlander with wet wipes, hand sanitizer, lotion, a lint roller, stain treatment, sunscreen and bug spray—the family’s mobile closet.

A small trash can sits on the floor of the front passenger seat. The homework kit in the back seat includes a clipboard, writing paper, flashcards, an eraser, pencils and a pencil sharpener. Snacks and drinks, a blanket, Mom’s tennis gear and first-aid supplies are stashed throughout the car. For longer drives on weekend getaways, Ms. Whitehead brings an entertainment box of DVD players and movies.

A cooler in the rear cargo area holds groceries. “I may be getting milk at noon and not home until 5,” Ms. Whitehead says.



Car makers tout comforts like plush seats, cupholders and DVD players. But those touches aren’t enough to accommodate the family on-the-go, parents say, leading them tinker with their own solutions.

“Outside of home and work, American families spend most of their time in the car,” says Katherine Wintsch, chief executive of the Mom Complex, a strategy consulting firm.

Ms. Wintsch tracks the “pain points,” or inconveniences, that thousands of mothers say they face during the day and says the car is a growing irritant. “A big pain point is not having what you need in the car,” says Ms. Wintsch. “Car manufacturers, food companies and product makers need to wake up to this.”

Fighting the steady accumulation of Cheerios, french fries and broken crayons in a car’s nooks and crannies is particularly difficult, parents say. During car rides, Danielle Silk, an elementary teacher in Annapolis, forbids her children to eat food that can’t be vacuumed, including yogurt and pudding

She designated the bottle holders in her SUV's car doors as waste baskets. "I don't think they're meant for trash, but that's what they are in our car," she says. "There's no place inside for a trash can."

Waste baskets made for the car sell well at the Container Store, says Chris Luce, a senior buyer for the retailer. "Sales are only getting stronger, and that goes to what's happening inside the car—a lot of meals."

Honda Motor Co. installed a vacuum in its 2014 Odyssey minivans after finding many consumers wanted the option of doing a "quick clean," on the go, especially when around other parents. "A dirty car is almost a reflection that they don't take care of their stuff, and that can reflect on how they run their household," says Dan Tiet, a Honda Odyssey senior product planner.

"We understand life in a minivan," says an ad for the "HondaVAC," which is built into the side of the rear cargo area and has a hose that extends through the car's interior. Honda says that the feature, available only on its top Odyssey Touring Elite model, has helped convince car buyers to upgrade. "It's selling more than we anticipated," says Mr. Tiet.

When Kia redesigned its 2015 Sedona van, it prioritized "small-item storage," including adding hooks to seat backs to hang shopping bags, and enlarging the sunglasses holder to accommodate oversize eyewear that is now popular with women, says Orth Hedrick, Kia Motor Co.'s vice president of product planning.

Kia also overhauled the console between the two front seats, making the beverage holders big enough to hold two 42-ounce drinks and installing a small tray to keep phones in view and in place. The console's storage compartment was designed with no exposed screws or other edges that could snag a handbag when stowed inside.

"The center console is like the coffee table in the living room," says Mr. Hedrick. "Everything happens around that thing."

Allstar Products Group is capitalizing on the shortcomings of vehicles' interiors. Since September, the company has sold one million units of the "Catch Caddy," a small plastic tub that squeezes between a car seat and the console to catch phones, sunglasses, coins and, according to its television ad, french fries.

Allstar chief executive Scott Boilen says he's currently hunting for a product that will keep a woman's handbag in place as she drives. "Anything that can make the travel experience more enjoyable or more efficient is a good market opportunity for us," he says.

Maintaining peace and control can be difficult in the car. Into the fray steps "Driver Easy Speak," which amplifies the driver's voice into the rear speakers on Toyota Motor Corp.'s Sienna minivan and Highlander. "It's hard to hear your parents when they're speaking toward the windshield," says Kibo Kitahama, Toyota's national manager for minivan and crossover marketing.

The ability to remove or collapse a seat to create space in cars is an oft-hailed convenience when lugging around big or odd-shaped loads like furniture, but parents say it also makes siblings get along better. "We get that feedback all the time," says Mr. Kitahama. "You can pop out the second row's middle seat and have all your kids separated."

Increasingly elaborate entertainment systems help, too, including screens that can play two programs at once, with wireless headphones that allow viewers to flip between programs or videogames.

"I think of it as a living room on wheels," says Jill Katic, head of minivans for the Chrysler brand, a unit of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV.

The Chrysler Town & Country minivan offers a dual-screen, Blu-ray-enabled entertainment system, individual lighting, reclining seats and a third-row that can be flipped to a tailgate-position. "You go to these big soccer parks and one child can be on the field, and the other one can be doing homework and you watch the game, all from your minivan," says Ms. Katic.

"I wish they could create a car with a bathroom in it," says Stacy Williams, a director of communications and marketing at a Baltimore school, and mother of six-year-old twins.

Ms. Katic of Chrysler says the idea often comes up, including the possibility of a composting toilet.