



by Karen Stephens

Business Travel: Preparing Kids for Your Absence and Keeping in Touch

During a preschool circle time, children discussed their parents' occupations. Four-year-old Joe shared that his Dad worked at the airport. His teacher asked if he was a pilot who flew planes or a mechanic who worked on them. The boy was stumped, "Um, I don't know. That's just where we take Daddy to work."

Following up with Joe's parents, the teacher discovered that Dad didn't work at the airport at all. But it quickly became obvious why Joe thought his father did.

The most tangible thing Joe knew about his father's work was where he and his mother took Dad almost every morning — you guessed it — to the airport.

From Joe's perspective, the airport was Dad's workplace. Preschooler Joe hadn't yet figured out that the airport was just Dad's work commute.

Especially for parents, the glamour of work-related travel wears off quickly. Frequent business travel wears on nerves and tugs at the heart. It can rob parents of irreplaceable child-rearing moments and create painful physical distance.

And it's not just tough on moms and dads. Young children often don't clearly understand where parents are during work travel, or why parents don't take the whole family along. If children are left unprepared for a parent's absence, it can be a time of scary uncertainty.

If you're a parent whose work schedule includes a lot of travel, the tips below will help you prepare children for your absence and help you stay in touch until your safe return.

- Remember, not all surprises are good. Forewarn kids before you travel. If you leave unannounced, you're likely to undermine trust. If you must leave very early in the morning, say your good-byes the night before. But avoid saying good-bye right at bedtime when children feel most alone anyway.
- Let children know why you have to travel for work. According to their ability to understand, briefly explain what you'll be doing. Sometimes kids wonder about the simplest things — like how you will get food to eat when you're not home. If those details worry your child, reassure them there are restaurants and grocery stores where you travel.
- Explain how long you'll be gone. Younger children won't understand calendar dates, so talk about how many nights sleep or how many days of child care it will be before you return home. School-aged children can mark off days on a calendar. (However, also prepare them for flight delays that upset the best of plans.)
- With today's easy exposure to news reports, children might worry about your travel mode. This is especially true if you're flying or taking a train after a reported accident. Reassure children that pilots or engineers will do their very best to get you where you're going safely.

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- Whenever possible, leave a photo or brochure of where you'll be — even if it's your hotel or company building. You can even leave web sites of your travel location that children can view. All that will help your child understand that you didn't just "disappear" somewhere.
- Use technology to stay in touch. Call home when you reach your destination and leave your contact number on the voice mail. Consider faxing and e-mailing messages or digital photos.
- Call home at agreed upon times or you're likely to miss each other; especially when in different time zones and/or countries.
- Don't forget promised call times. Most kids — especially preschoolers — don't talk a lot during phone calls, but they still like to hear your voice. If you get delayed, remember to give kids a sincere apology once you do talk with them.

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- Help children maintain a sense of your presence in the home by leaving them with one of your favorite items. It can be something as simple as a sweater, sports cap, book, or photographs.
- Leave love notes under pillows, in backpacks, or under meal cups to remind your child you think of them even when you're gone.
- Draw up IOUs for activities you'll do together once you return, such as go to the park or children's museum.
- Continue participating in daily routines even when you're gone. Leave a video of you reading a bedtime story. Make a tape recording of you and your child singing favorite songs and leave it with a tape recorder for listening.
- If you miss a special event, holiday, or birthday, don't waste time feeling guilty. Limit those occasions as much as you can, but a missed event isn't the end of the world. Instead, spend your energy planning together how you'll re-celebrate when you return. Or plan how to celebrate together long distance, such as singing "Happy Birthday" over the phone.
- If you are gone a long time, periodically mail home little treasures for the kids. Items easy to mail include coloring books, paperback books, stickers, puzzles, bookmarks, stuffed animals or puppets, or a few foreign coins.

Those are just a few ideas to help ease parent-child separation during travel. There are many more useful ideas in the book *The Business Traveling Parent* by Dan Verdick (Beltsville, MD: Robins Lane Press, 2000). Verdick shares lots of ways to creatively stay in touch with children until the joy of your next reunion. *Bon voyage!*

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.