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EXECUTIVE MOMS - Staying Connected When You Travel

New! Hotshots answer your sticky questions



Photo: Veer

Q: How do you stay connected to your children when you travel for your job?

Genevieve Girault

Director, HR Communications

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP

Kids: Sophia, 8, and Julian, 6

Travel: Typically two to four times a month for two to four days at a time

A: I'll admit that several years ago I was riddled with guilt every time I left on a business trip. Sometimes I would actually pretend I wasn't away, especially if it was just an overnight trip, thinking it would be less stressful for my children if they thought I was working late at night and leaving early in the morning. I started to dread hearing, "Why do you have to go, Mommy?" because I felt like I never had a good answer.

Very early on, I fell into the trap of bringing back small gifts, trinkets I'd grab at the airport or the hotel gift shop. The pleasure it gave my children temporarily took the focus away from my absence.

One day, however, after returning home from a late night in the office, I was forced to reexamine my strategy. My then 4-year-old daughter, Sophia, greeted me at home not with a kiss but by lunging into my bag and asking, "What did you bring me?" I realized I'd created an unpleasant sense of entitlement and materialism in my kids.

I started talking to other working moms, and I began to realize how useless, and even destructive, guilt can be. "No one wins," a friend told me, and she was right. She advised me to find ways to show my children how important my career was to me and to highlight the benefits I derived from it—not from a financial perspective but from an emotional and educational one. I started to talk very differently to my kids about both my work and my travel, emphasizing that it was a grown-up way of learning, like school was for them. I would share stories that focused on the positive aspects of my job and my travels, explaining what I

saw and learned.

Instead of hiding the fact that I had to leave on a business trip, I talked about it, giving them advance warning and taking the time to show them where I was going on a map.

I also try to make a game of my absence. One inspired evening, I found some little wooden hearts with painted words and sayings on them. I began a tradition of hiding the hearts in their bedrooms before leaving on a trip—under bookcases, in dresser drawers—and leaving my husband with a "treasure map." Then at bedtime, instead of focusing on missing Mommy, they look forward to their little treasure hunt. When possible, I call them right before bed and give them clues. It's just a little way of making it seem like I'm right there with them even when I'm not.

I still walk into their rooms and see my guilt purchases from those early trips, like the miniature Toto in a basket from Kansas City. And, to be honest, I still do look for fun giveaways when I attend a conference. But I know I can't substitute presents for my presence. It's not a good message, and most children are far too smart for that anyway.

Paula Zusi

Corporate VP Global Manufacturing & Sourcing

Liz Claiborne Inc.

Kids: Kaelyn, 10, and Jake, 8

Travel: About four times internationally, ten times domestically per year

A: Things were easier when the kids were younger. Back then my big worry was that they'd get sick right before a trip. Now they have a lot more going on with school and activities, so there's more to stay on top of while I'm away. My son, Jake, was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder at a young age, and I was concerned about how he would deal with my travel. He had a difficult time initially, but now it's my daughter, Kaelyn, who's struggling. She starts to give me a hard time as soon as I tell her a trip is upcoming.

To ease the stress, I let them know a few days in advance about my business trips. When they ask how long I'll be gone, I tell them the truth, and we make plans to do fun things when I return. Being away on weekdays is usually easier, as they're busy with school and activities. On weekends, we arrange for family members to visit or for the kids to sleep over at their grandparents' house, so they're distracted.

Daily phone calls are our primary method of staying in touch. Jake is fascinated with the time difference when I travel to Asia. I usually call home at about 7:00 a.m. Hong Kong time, which is the prior evening in the States. He loves to ask me what I'm eating for breakfast while he tells me what he just ate for dinner.

Kaelyn is always coming up with ways for us to stay connected. She thinks it would be fun to buy a big world map and put pushpins on the places where "Mommy is when she's away" so that she and her brother have a better understanding of where I am.

Michelle Robinson

Senior VP Southern Region

Verizon Communications

Kids: John (JJ), 4, and Ethan, 1

Travel: Four or five overnight trips and at least one trip for multiple nights per month

A: Right up front, I'd like you to join my informal poll confirming that the sound a cell phone makes when you receive a message is one of the sweetest sounds on earth. Of course, I represent the interests of a communications company. But the reason my ears perk up and I have an irresistible urge to smile when I hear that sound has nothing to do with my company. It's because I spend a lot of time on the road and my cell phone has become a window into my sons' lives when I'm away.

JJ, Ethan and I moved to Atlanta nine months ago for a promotion. That's the good news. The bad news: My husband had to stay behind in California to finish the construction of our dream home. Ever since I've had JJ, business trips have been the toughest part of my job. And now, with my husband in California, they have become even harder, despite the support of our great caregiver. So when I'm away, I increasingly depend on calls, video clips and photos to keep me connected to my family.

In the Robinson household, the rule of thumb for photos or videos is "the sillier, the better," but even mundane things become special: playing tidal wave in the tub, slurping spaghetti, Mom singing "Hush, Little Baby" before bedtime. When I'm on the road, especially when I'm gone for a few nights, I find myself desperately waiting for that chiming sound. Message!