

iBlankie

every parent's security blanket



TRAVELING PARENTS: 15 TIPS TO STAY CONNECTED TO YOUR CHILD

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is a short trip or a long trip, traveling away from your child can be challenging for both of you. Solid separation experiences are special gifts that you can give your child. Through preparation beforehand and specific strategies while you travel, separation challenges can be eased and both you and your child can reach the ultimate goal: separating and reuniting with a smile.

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SENSORY CONNECTIONS

Your child interacts with the world on a very sensory, concrete level. When you leave a child, a concrete sensory connection between you and your child can be very helpful. Your child can't keep you with them, but your child can have pieces of you in very concrete sensory forms and that can be very reassuring. It is important to think of all of the senses that may help you connect to your child.

Tip #1. The Visual Connection: Photos, Love Notes & Zoom

Having a photo of you and your child can be especially effective for your young child who needs a visual to help them feel secure and to feel that you are near. Place a photo on their nightstand. Sometimes a small love note, with a heart or a lipstick kiss, that your spouse or caregiver provides as a small surprise in your child's lunchbox or on their pillow can keep the connection going. Of course, this requires some preparation and pre-writing of notes. Arrange a certain time to Zoom with your child, ideally the same time each day.

When Dad left on a business trip, Sean's Mom pinned a photo of Sean and Dad upside-down to his shirt so that he could flip the photo up at any time to see him and Dad together.

Tip #2. The Concrete Connection: Snail Mail

Children rarely get mail, so this will be a special treat and reminder that you are thinking of them. The preparation beforehand is worth it. You can even begin mailings before you leave so that your child receives something on your first day away. (You may want to have someone do the mailings for you locally.) Write love notes or postcards or send stickers to your child so that your child receives a small connection every day or every few days. You can mail small treasures such as erasers, small matchbox cars, barrettes or hairbows, finger puppets, and other tchotchkes.

Tip #3. The Auditory Connection: Recordings & Phone Calls

Having an audio recording of you reading a favorite book or singing a favorite song can be very reassuring to your child whenever they want to hear your voice while you are away. Set up a certain time to phone your child, ideally the same time each day.

Roseanne liked to listen to a recording of her mom reading their favorite bedtime story while her mom was traveling. The recording helped Roseanne feel close to her mom and helped her go to sleep.

Tip #4. The Tactile & Emotional Connection: A Special Object

Beyond the transitional lovey or blankie, a tactile connection can be made by leaving a special possession of yours with your child.

When Jennifer left her 3-year-old daughter Jessica for a long trip, she took off one of her pierced earrings and pinned it onto Jessica's dress, which was very reassuring to Jessica.

Before his father left for a business conference, his father told young Rashid to choose anything he wanted of Dad's to have while he was away. Rashid went into his father's closet and chose a special tie that he wore, held, and slept with until Dad returned from his trip.

Tip #5. The Smell Connection: Let Your Scent Linger

Young children often have strong associations through their sense of smell. Take a handkerchief or piece of cloth and rub it on your body—hair, underarms, etc.—to provide an olfactory reminder of you. Your child may feel closer to you when they can smell you. This cloth could then be tucked into your child's backpack or pocket, to be used when your child wants a whiff of mom or dad for reassurance.

Jorge's Dad took the undershirt that he had worn all day and, without washing it, offered it as a nightshirt to Jorge to help him feel close to his Dad during the night.

MARKING TIME

Sometimes parents can forget how time moves much more slowly for children than for adults. An interesting guide for understanding time concepts for children is to compare your age and your child's age.

Suppose you are 33 and your child is 3—you are 11 times older than your child. In terms of time perception, 1 day in your child's life is the way you experience 11 days in your life.

What is a trip of "just a few days" in an adult's reality can seem like weeks to a child.

Tip #6. Provide A Simple Calendar To Mark Off Days

Many young children cannot translate calendars into the concept of time. If your child is older than four and very visual, you can set them up with a calendar and provide picture codes to delineate the days. Then your child can mark off the travel days as they pass, either with an X or a sticker.

Tip #7. The Gift Bowl

Marking time is made more concrete for a child with a Gift Bowl. Fill a large bowl with small wrapped gifts (a good resource is a Dollar Store or a novelty catalog such as Oriental Trading Company). Your child can be told that you were thinking of them and they can choose one gift from the Gift Bowl each day. Have one gift in the bowl for each day that you are away, except for the day you return. On the last day they get the best gift of all—you!

Gift Bowl suggestions: stickers, stamp and stamp pad, ball, barrettes/hair bands, mini-size candy, fun eraser, box of crayons, small LEGO set, Polly Pockets, fun drinking straw, key chain, beads to string, activity book, craft supplies, fun pencils.

LEARNING & PLAYING THROUGH

Children learn through play. Adults often talk through their conflicting feelings; the same relief and resolution that you find in words, your child finds in play. You can help your child play through separation issues with games and books.

Separation games and books should help your child play out the important concept that "people disappear from sight, then people reappear, people disappear, then people reappear." This rhythmic theme is to counter your child's fearful notion that parents disappear when out of sight and fall into a black hole, never to be seen again. Children from the earliest stages are working on this rhythmic play theme of things disappear, things reappear, as can be evidenced with the peek-a-boo games that young children love.

Tip #8. Play Separation Games

The game of Hide and Go Seek is a very important separation game. In Hide and Seek, if your child can be both hider and seeker, your child can gain a feeling of mastery over your disappearance when you travel. Most children love this game because they are working internally on separation issues.

Many playground and other games can be adapted for playing through/working through separations. For example, when pushing your child on a swing say or sing "Away you go, far away on an adventure" and then as they return for a push, say or sing "And now you are back here with me again." When playing tag, say, "Now you are running far away" and "Now you are going to home base to be safe." When doing chase games you can talk about your child running away and that, no matter how far away they run, you are going to catch them or they can return, so that you can be together again.

Tip #9. Read Books!

Reading books with separation themes is a way to help your child work through separation issues involving parental travel. Books that can be reassuring for you and your child include these classics:

- Where's Spot?* Series by Eric Hill
- Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell
- Mooncake*, by Frank Asch
- A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza
- Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman
- Corduroy*, by Dan Freeman
- The Three Little Pigs* (Disney version)
- The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn
- Will You Come Back for Me?* by Ann Tompert
- Biggest Boy*, by Kevin Henkes
- Blueberries for Sal*, by Robert McClosky
- The Good-bye Book* by Judith Viorst
- Goodnight Moon, The Runaway Bunny, Home for a Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown

Tip# 10. Create a Book!

With hand-drawn pictures or photographs and dictated text, you and your child can create a book before you leave. This book can be a wonderful resource for your child to hold and refer to while you are absent.

Before Mom left town, she and Kayla glued several photos of them having fun onto index cards. They stapled these together and made a "Kayla and Mom" cover with drawings and stickers and Kayla kept this in her backpack when she went to school.

RITUALIZE IT

Rituals can be the bookends to contain your travel and can ease the transitions of leaving and returning. Rituals can involve songs, activities, and, most powerfully, food. The ritual can be a joint creation. The goodbye and hello rituals gain power and comfort in the repetition whenever you travel.

Tip# 11. Create a Goodbye Ritual

You can create new Goodbye Rituals for your traveling on trips on your can piggyback onto your goodbye rituals that you use for leaving for work or dropping your child at school or daycare. As part of the goodbye ritual, your child might want to help you pack and even send you with something of theirs. Your older child might want to track your travel on a map or globe. You might want to have a Goodbye Dinner at home or a restaurant or a special goodbye food shared at the time of separation (Goodbye Gummy Bears). You might want to do a special Goodbye Song or Goodbye Soccer Game in your living room or backyard. Special hug and kiss rituals also help the goodbye.

Tip# 12. Create a "Mellow Hello" Ritual

Think "Mellow Hello." It is important to have realistic expectations. Often parents are tired at the end of a trip. Anticipate that your child may have a meltdown soon after you arrive home as part of the transition. Hello Rituals are best when little is required of you and your child. Hello Rituals can be: special board games chosen by your child (the structure of board games can help); special Hello Dance, Hello Song or Hello Hand-shakes; Make-Your-Own Ice Cream Sundae party followed by a kid video (requires very little and a tired parent can even doze off); or Pancakes and Poppa.

TALKING TO YOUR CHILD

Tip# 13. Don't Speak Too Soon

Unless you are involved in elaborate preparations for your trip, it is best not to tell your child too soon about your travel. A day or two or three before you leave is plenty of time to tell your child about your trip. Telling your child weeks in advance can make you feel less anxious about your trip, but can cause anxiety in your child about a situation that they might find challenging but that they can't change. Be low-key and positive. The underlying message should be that your child can function independently and happily while you are away: "I will miss you....you'll be okay, you'll have a great time. I'll be okay, I'll have a great time."

Tip# 14. Describe Your Travel in a Simple, Concrete Manner

Using words, paint a simple, very concrete picture of your whereabouts so that your child can have a clear mental image of where you will be. For a young child, one or two sentences is usually sufficient for a verbal connection. You can also play-act your trip with your child, acting out your car/plane/train trip, checking into your accommodations, describing your work and what you will be doing in simple terms.

"I'll be getting on the train...(perhaps sing the Wheels on the Train song)...then carrying my suitcase to a hotel...having a snack of nuts in my room...going to sleep...going to meetings in an office like a classroom each day...talking to people and writing reports on the computer. Then I'll be taking the train home...Grandma will be staying with you. She knows how to take you to daycare. And I am sure that she will want to do the usual fun things with you-bake cookies and play Candyland. I will miss you. You'll be fine and I'll be fine."

Tip# 15. Accept All Your Child's Feelings

There may be a lot for your child to feel: sadness at your leaving, excitement at being at Grandma's, disappointment if you are missing a special event or holiday, and possibly anger at their perceived abandonment by you. Your child may also hold all these feelings while you are away and then release these feelings when you are safe at home. Be prepared and try to be accepting of all the feelings.

I left my daughter for five days when she was 2-1/2 years old. The day that I came home she waited on Grandma's front steps for 2 hours for my arrival. When I arrived, she ran into the house and then she wouldn't look at me or talk to me for several hours. It was hard for me, but she obviously had a lot of mixed feelings about my trip.

SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING

Solid separation experiences are special gifts that you can give your child. By implementing specific concrete strategies, separation challenges can be eased and you and your child can separate and unite with a smile.

iBlankie goes deeper into these issues in our longer report on [Separation Anxiety](#).