

SundayTravel

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WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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EMILIE CHOLLAT

Separation *adaptation*

WITH PLANNING (**AND SOCKS**), KIDS WILL BE ALL RIGHT WHEN YOU TRAVEL WITHOUT THEM

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The first trips I took without my daughter, starting when she was 18 months old, mirrored scenes out of a bad TV drama: We suffered prolonged teary departures with multiple goodbyes, held disastrous video calls that left my daughter wound up and weepy, and me full of guilt; and discovered that announcing a trip too far in advance made an independent little girl become clingy. We also realized that airport drop-offs can be the worst.

Four years and a second child later, we have learned how to make those goodbyes go a lot smoother and come up with tactics for making Mom or Dad's time away from home more bearable, and even fun. Preparing your child

for your travels depends a lot on his or her age, personality, and temperament, and your family situation. Every child and every family is different, but here are some ideas to consider the next time you prepare for a child-free trip, and once you're underway.

ANNOUNCING THE TRIP

How far in advance you mention the trip depends on how long your trip will be, your child's age and current emotional state, and whether or not other stressors exist. To minimize stress, pick a time when they aren't tired, upset, or frustrated.

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Prepare your child and stay in touch

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“Warning children 3 years old and younger too far ahead of time does not help them, especially if the focus is on talking about the parent being gone and for how long,” says Julia Heberle, an associate professor of psychology at Albright College in Reading, Pa., and a developmental psychologist. “Children this age have barely mastered time vocabulary, so ‘tomorrow’ can just mean ‘not now,’ or ‘forever away.’”

My kids, now 3 and 5, still don’t fully understand the concept of time, so I don’t go into too many details about how many days until I leave or how many days I’ll be gone. If I’m going on a trip that’s a week or longer, I’ll let them know about a week before I go, and then casually mention it here and there so the idea sinks in and becomes familiar. For shorter trips, I wait until about two days before I leave, and then I hype up all the things they’ll get to do while I’m away. That takes the focus off what will be missing: Mom.

Older kids often benefit from more advanced notice because it lets them get used to the idea and plan.

“I tell my son as far in advance as possible,” says Rachel Vasak, a guest instructor for Girls on Ice, a wilderness science education program in the Northwest, and mother of a 7-year-old. “This kid’s memory rivals an elephant’s, and he has a deep-rooted need to plan. I will do things to engage him in my planning that do not focus on the separation. I may ask him, ‘Do you want to see a map of Momma’s trip? What food do you think I should eat? Should I bring the purple socks or the blue socks?’ In that process, I’m getting his investment in my trip and as his investment grows, he seems to come to terms with the emotional part too.”

Follow your child’s lead, and share as much or as little information about the trip as needed. Your child may want to know all about your destination — where it’s located on a map, where you will sleep, and what you will do while there — or may simply want to know how many times he or she will go to sleep until you get home.

THE BENEFITS OF PARENTAL TRAVEL

Parents travel for many reasons, and while it can be challenging, a little parent-child separation can also be healthy. I travel without my children for up to several weeks a year, which gives my husband and kids special time together, and helps the kids gain more independence in their typically mom-centric world. I also want them to see that there are things I am passionate about — seeing and experiencing the world, and meeting people from other cultures — but that I will always come back.

Keri Kliemann, a Seattle mother of an 8-year-old daughter, says, “I came up with a simple mantra for my daughter to use whenever she misses me: ‘Be brave and proud.’ Be brave while Mom is gone (it won’t be for long), and proud that your mom is a good worker and earns money for us — I am divorced, so this is very im-



LAUREL WATJEN

Laurel Watjen took her daughter’s stuffed bunny to Indonesia with her and sent her daughter, 4, photos of the bunny’s adventures.

portant! I want my daughter to grow up being independent and motivated — brave and proud.”

SAYING GOODBYES

We have learned the hard way that it’s best to keep the goodbyes short and sweet. Dragging it out, or spending too much time reassuring kids that you will come home, is not productive. We do put thought into where we say our goodbyes. It goes a lot smoother if the kids are immersed in an art project, out riding their bikes, or heading over to a neighbor’s house for a play date, rather than watching Mom or Dad go through the airport security gate into a passenger-only zone.

Nor should you ever just slip out the door without saying goodbye.

“It is very important for the parent to say goodbye, and not just leave,” says Lori Attanasio Woodring, a child psychologist with a practice in Greenwich, Conn. “The goodbye shouldn’t be drawn out or dramatic, but it’s important to always say goodbye and remind kids that you will be back.”

LEAVE BEHIND LITTLE HEARTFELT REMINDERS

Some parents leave little gifts or notes behind for their children to find, or record themselves reading a bedtime story. Others will give their kids a special object for them to hold onto or, for infants and younger kids, a piece of clothing that smells like mom or dad. One mother I know writes soap notes on the bathroom mirror to be discovered later when the shower fogs it up.

“Before I went to China for a month, I taped 30 envelopes on my son Jacob’s wall, each one labeled with a date, and put a different note or quote or treat in them,” says Deborah Grayson Riegel of New York, whose twins were 9 at the time. “He could only open one a day, and really looked forward to waking up and doing just that.”

“My daughter, Sophie, and I have several pairs of fuzzy socks that we love,” adds Grayson Riegel. “Before I go away, we split the pairs and commit that we will each wear, for example, the striped sock on our right foot

and the solid sock on our left foot to sleep. That makes us feel connected to one another.”

Laurel Watjen traveled to Indonesia for two weeks when her daughter Izzy was 4, their first long separation from each other.

“I took Izzy’s small stuffed rabbit, April, and took photos of the rabbit in various locations,” recalls Watjen, who lives in Washington. “I called Izzy at one point and told her that April had stowed away in my suitcase and was having a great adventure. She loved seeing the pictures.”

KEEP BUSINESS AS USUAL BACK HOME

Give kids plenty of comfort and support while one parent travels, and the reassurance that life will march on as usual.

“If I ever have to leave my kids, I make sure everything is consistent throughout their day,” says country music star and Holliston-native Jo Dee Messina, who has two boys, 3 and 6, and just coauthored “Chicken Soup for the Soul: Thanks to My Mom,” released in March. “They have the same schedules throughout the day, same nap time, same lunchtime, and the same nanny who knows our rules and the way we discipline. It’s very important to have that consistency.”

That doesn’t mean you can’t add play dates and special outings to make the time you’re away more fun for your children, but it helps to maintain the usual overall routine, so the days remain as familiar and predictable as possible.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO STAY CONNECTED

In today’s uber-connected world, it’s easy to stay in touch by phone, e-mail, and video calls, but you need to figure out what works best for your kids and your travel schedule. Time differences, flight delays, work commitments, and other travel factors can make connecting at the right time a trick. Don’t promise to call if there’s any chance it won’t happen, and feelings may be hurt.

Video calls can work great for some children. For others, they can

be a definite setback.

“For children under 3, keeping a picture of the parent nearby or something associated with the parent can be a source of comfort,” says Heberle of Albright College. “Unless the child is already accustomed to seeing his or her parent on FaceTime, video calls will not be helpful because children this age have a hard time distinguishing the reality of screens from reality generally.”

Sometimes, it just depends on the day and your child’s temperament. I had wonderful Skype interactions with my daughter when she was just 2½ years old, and failed conversations when she was 5 that left her teary and unable to sleep. My husband and I quickly learned that conversations within an hour of bedtime rarely end well.

“It has definitely not worked for us to do much in the way of calls, FaceTime, or Skype,” says Vasak. “As a replacement, he has been encouraged to do something whenever he is missing Momma: Draw a picture for her, write a letter, or make a video to send her. That way, he initiates it when he needs to, and has a positive outlet for his feelings, and then I come home to great stories, pictures, or perhaps a bouquet of flowers from the yard.”

Grayson Riegel’s twins, now 14, have fairly opposite needs.

“My daughter, Sophie, wants to know exactly when she will be able to speak with me while I am away,” says Grayson Riegel. “She has a lot of information that she needs to download to me! My son, Jacob, wants to know what cool things I’m seeing and doing and eating while I’m away. Sophie wants to push information out, and Jacob wants to pull information in.”

With some sensitivity and creativity, and perhaps a little trial and error, you can figure out how to prepare your child for your travels and the best way to feel close when you’re far away. That way, your goodbyes and trips will go smoothly, and you can avoid some of the bad TV drama scenes my family has reenacted.

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Kids have big say in vacation plans

By Juliet Pennington
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Children are more involved than ever in planning family vacations, according to a recently released global survey.

Nearly 90 percent of parents in five countries said their kids weigh in on vacation planning, with about one in three (34 percent) of US millennial parents allowing their kids to have full control over the final vacation destination.

The online survey of more than 2,800 children (ages 6 to 18) and parents in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain, was conducted in April by HomeAway, the world’s leading online vacation rental company, in partnership with independent market research firm YouGov.

“We are surprised the survey shows kids have such an extreme influence on family travel decisions,” said Brian Sharples, HomeAway cofounder and CEO. “The whole family is now invested in the experience, with kids bringing their own travel preferences to the table.”

Among the survey’s findings:

■ The vast majority of parents (85 percent in the United States, 76 percent in the United Kingdom, 86 percent in France, 95 percent in Germany, 94 percent in Spain) give their children some say in vacation decisions.

■ One in three millennial parents in the United States (34 percent) allow children to make the final decision on vacation, while only 8 percent of US parents age 55 and older give their children the final say.

■ The majority (60 percent) of parents in the United States view kids’ input as a way to ensure that their offspring get more out of the vacation. More than half (53 percent) involve their kids in the planning process to get them excited about the trip, 42 percent say they involve their kids so they can learn about new things, and nearly one quarter (24 percent) use vacation planning as an educational opportunity.

■ As far as togetherness goes, 50 percent of the kids surveyed said that spending quality time together as a family is paramount, while 41 percent of the parents said the same. Twenty-seven percent of parents cited making lasting memories as the priority, 15 percent said exploring new places and culture, 10 percent said relaxation, and 6 percent said “disconnecting.”

Parents and kids agree they want extended family and friends on their ideal vacation, with parents wanting to include relatives or their children’s grandparents (38 percent) and kids wanting their friends to come along (55 percent).

■ Nearly one-third (32 percent) of kids would like to bring their pets; 22 percent said leaving their pet at home during past vacations has “annoyed” them.

■ The survey also found that parents’ swimming attire ranks first in the parents-mortifying-their-children department. That item was followed closely by the practical — but lame in many teenagers’ eyes — fanny pack.

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