

TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT YOUR TRAVELS AND SUPPORTING THEM THROUGH THE PROCESS



Travel is a reality of our work, and one that can be exciting and rewarding, as well as challenging and draining. We recognize the toll that this takes, not only on our staff, but also on family members of our employees. In many cases, the anxiety felt by loved ones about a trip may be greater than that felt by staff. The below tips may help you to ease some of the anxiety that your children may feel before and after you travel.

Every child is different, as are the dynamics in each family. You know best what will work with yours. These tips have been taken from examples given by other aid workers, as well as adapted from some open-source Canadian and American resources on military family support.

Please note that it is not uncommon for parents and caregivers to experience changes in their personal comfort levels for accepting risk. We encourage you to discuss this with your supervisor, the HR team, and/or the Safety and Security Lead as it is important to us that you feel safe and supported in your work. We will look at possibilities to make adjustments for you if this is feasible, and if it isn't we will support you in making a decision to decline a risk if you feel this is best for you and your family. We value the diversity of our team, and parents and caregivers make up a big part of it!

BEFORE YOU GO:

- 1) Tell your kids about your trip and engage them in the planning. Post a map on a wall and put pins in all the places you'll be going.
- 2) Talk about what the country is known for. Focus on the positives, particularly for younger children. For older children, ask them first what they know about the country. This may open up space for them to share their concerns about your travel, particularly if they know that there is a conflict or natural disaster happening there.
- 3) Older children/teens may want to know what organizational preparations are in place to keep you safe. Share these with them, and if you need help, talk to the S&S lead. Things you may want to discuss are training that you've had, precautions that the office takes, the safety of the hotels where you'll be staying, and a bit about the people you'll be working with.
- 4) Younger children will be more concerned about their own well-being during your absence than yours. Help them to understand how their needs will be met. Do you normally read them bed time stories and tuck them in? Are you the one who cooks dinner and makes their lunches for school? Let them know who will fill in for you.
- 5) Make sure that you are speaking to their concerns, not yours.
- 6) If they ask you a straight question, give them a straight answer (in age-appropriate language). Children know when they're not being told the truth, and may feel justified in their fears, thus increasing them further, if they worry that you are hiding something. Knowing is often more reassuring than not knowing.
- 7) Don't overthink it-if they don't seem worried, they may not be. If they're not asking questions, they may not have any.
- 8) Consider alerting their teachers. Children sometimes act out, or become more withdrawn, during parental absences. There may be things the teacher can do to help out-maybe they can let your child read the class a book about the place you are going to, or talk about your trip during a show-and-tell activity.
- 9) Talk with other parents about scheduling a couple of play dates with your child's friends while you are away. This will give them something to look forward to and may keep their mind off of your absence.
- 10) Talk about the work you are doing and why it is important (how you do this will vary depending on your child's age).
- 11) Give your child some special tasks to do around the house in your absence to help fill in the gaps and give them a sense that they are helping. Make sure that these tasks are child-appropriate, and not adult-level responsibilities!
- 12) Manage their expectations for how often you'll be in touch with them while you're away.
- 13) Invest time in building a support network that you can call on for assistance during your travels and don't be afraid to ask for help. The person you leave your child with may have their hands full, particularly if this is not something they do on a regular basis, and having a plan to support them (with school pick-ups, extra-curricular drop-offs, grocery shopping, etc.) will not only benefit them, but also your child! And don't forget that we may be able to offer a small thank you gift to these people. Please talk to someone on the HR team about this option.

WHILE YOU ARE AWAY:

- 1) Figure out how to remain in touch
 - a. Skype, WhatsApp, snapchat, or phone calls are good options
 - b. If you will be in an area with limited communications you can write short letters that you leave at home, and they've got one to open each day, or every few days
- 2) Send pictures of things that you are doing so that they can see them. Seeing things (and you) for themselves may provide some reassurance that you are well.
- 3) If you've got video skype, set up a few minutes where you can show them your hotel room, your work space, and maybe even introduce them to the colleagues you are working with.
- 4) For younger children, record some bedtime stories for them to listen to.
- 5) Give your children journals (provided they can write) and encourage them to keep records of everything that they want to tell you when you get home about how their days went, etc.
- 6) Exchange comfort items-perhaps you each have small charms or stuffed animals that you exchange each time you leave. Keeping them small means the kids can keep them with them in their school bags, in their pockets, etc. When they get lonely, they can touch it and know you are thinking of them (and you can do the same when you get lonely!).
- 7) Hide treats around the house for them and leave them scavenger hunt notes to guide them each day
- 8) Bring back souvenirs for your kids, and maybe even start a collection: stuffed animals, magnets, coins, etc.
- 9) Fill a jar with small candies, and keep it with a calendar. Have one candy in the jar for each day you will be gone. After dinner each day your child can have a candy for dessert, and cross off another day. As they see the candy jar get emptier, and the date come closer on the calendar, they've got reference points for when they'll see you again.
- 10) Remember that the Employee Assistance Program can also be used by your family members, including your children. Remind them of this, explain the service and how to access it, and leave the number easily accessible for them. If they are younger, explain this service to the person who will be their primary caregiver in your absence.

WHEN YOU GET HOME:

- 1) Share stories about your trip, and focus on the positives.
- 2) Ask your kids what worked well for them and what didn't-kind of like an after action review. You will probably need to travel again, so use this opportunity to come up with a plan to work out the kinks for the next time.
- 3) Return comfort items so you've got them again for your next trip.
- 4) Schedule some time out with just you and your child to catch up.
- 5) With older kids, if something did go wrong on your trip, consider sharing it with them. This may be a good option if it was something minor (ie: theft, minor car accident) that was handled very well, as this may increase their confidence both in you and the organization.

"The Tough Stuff" is a series of guidance notes put out by CARE Canada's Safety and Security Unit that addresses some of the uncomfortable-and important-safety and security issues facing our staff.