

Fastbreak For Fathers

a monthly e-mail to help you be the kind of dad your child needs you to be.

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In this issue: *Staying connected when work takes you on the road.*

Observations

For many dads, the challenging task of fathering is made even more difficult because of the amount **over night travel** demanded by their work. A survey of business-traveling parents discovered that 50% of the respondents traveled more than 12 times a year. Of these parents, 90% had at least one child who was 10 years or younger. The globalization process has required more employees, and especially managers, to increase their travel time and accessibility. Often these trips contribute to the frustration and stress level at home, but there are positive fathering steps you can take to make business travel less stressful and more manageable for the entire family. How you handle your goings and comings – and your time on the road – has a big impact on your family reacts to your travels. This issue of *Fastbreak* won't help you navigate the "friendly skies," but it should help with the atmospheric pressure at home!

Ideas

Acknowledge your spouse's feelings. One line of research demonstrates that a child's response to separation will depend greatly on how the at-home parent deals with separation – his or her coping skills, the anticipation of the reunion and the general satisfaction with the relationship all contribute to how your child will understand and cope with your traveling. For this reason one of the most important things you can do is to acknowledge your partner's feelings about your travel. Your wife may be used to your comings and goings, but that shouldn't excuse you from validating her feelings and doing what you can to help her cope with your extended absences. In addition to giving her your ear you may want to have a surprise gift sent while you are on the road, or a "getaway" weekend using your frequent flier miles.

Be sensitive to your children's emotional bank accounts. Ken Canfield, Director of the National Center for Fathering, suggests that this is the most important idea for traveling dads to grasp. Canfield relates that, "Your kids' emotional disposition toward you is like a bank account. When you're involved in their lives – available to meet their needs and *connected* with them emotionally – you're making *deposits*. When work keeps you at the office late, when you've been taking a big project home at night, or when you have to leave town, those are *withdrawals* from your children's accounts. If you know that a big withdrawal is coming up – say, a week-long business trip – then plan in advance to make plenty of deposits in the weeks and days leading up to it."

Make your business trips as short as possible, even if this means getting home at midnight. Let your kids know that you hate being away from them. Tell them how much you miss their hugs, their presence and your interactions with them. Tell them how wonderful it is to walk in the door, drop your luggage, and yell, "Dad's Home!"

Establish rituals surrounding your travel. Just as it is important to create daily rituals for staying connected, it is important to create rituals that signal your departure and return.

Depending on the ages of your children they may find it meaningful to:

- "help" you pack
- leave special notes for you in your travel bag
- send something with you that they treasure. For younger children this serves to connect them with you better than knowing you have a photo of them in your wallet.
- have a special meal with you before you leave
- exchange e-mails with you
- read with you over the phone

For your part, you may want to consider the following ideas:

- leave a surprise note or gift for them to find
- tape yourself reading one of their favorite stories
- identify a "best time" to call before leaving
- ask specific questions about their day
- leave a surprise message on the answering machine
- have "dinner" with the family via a speaker phone

Reentry can be one of the most important parts of business travel. Take time to refocus your attention on your family before you walk through the door. The most energetic greeting may come from the family dog, but that doesn't mean that your kids haven't missed you as much. Regardless of their response, show your own enthusiasm for being with them again. You may not be able to top the family dog, but you can make a memorable impression of how important they are to you.

What really matters for kids when you travel is your dependability and trustworthiness – that their world stays safe and understandable; that they know where you're going, why, when you're coming back, who's going to take care of them and for how long; that you miss them and will return. You don't have to bend yourself out of shape while you're away. How kids respond to our absences is really determined by how we are when we are with the. If they feel we really love them, that endures all kinds of separation.

- Samuel Osherson, *The Passions of Fatherhood* (Fawcett Columbine, 1995)

Helpful resources for traveling dads:

- *Dads at a Distance* (<http://www.daads.com>)
- *Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family* by James Levine (Harvest Books, 1998).
- *Family First: Tales Of A Working Father* by Robert Blodgett (Grendel Press, 2002).

Research

Crouter et al examined the **relationship between men's overwork or excessive work hours, their subjective feelings of role overload, and the quality of their family relationships.** Perspectives were gathered on each relationship from both partners in the relationship: husbands and wives, and fathers and adolescents. Data was collected from two adolescents in each family: firstborns, who were approximately age 15, and their secondborn siblings, who were about age 12 1/2.

Holding constant men's occupational self-direction and level of education, long hours were related to less time spent with the wife but were unrelated to spouses' love, perspective-taking, or conflict; high levels of role overload consistently predicted less positive marital relationships. In contrast, the combination of long hours and high overload was consistently associated with less positive father-adolescent relationships, a pattern that was similar for older and younger adolescents and for sons and daughters. They found that overwork and overload have different implications depending upon the relationship and the relationship dimension in question. The father-adolescent relationship fares less well when fathers not only work long hours but also feel stressed and overloaded: it is the combination of overwork and overload that is problematic. It should be noted that the data reported is correlational, meaning one cannot determine the direction of effects linking fathers' work experiences and family relationships. Do long hours and feelings of role overload jeopardize certain family relationships in certain ways or do men whose family relationships are less positive throw themselves into their work? Father-adolescent relationships may be additionally stressed at this time because adolescents typically spend less time with the family.

Implications of Overwork and Overload for the Quality of Men's Family Relationships, By: Crouter, Ann C., Bumpus, Matthew E., Head, Melissa R., Mchale, Journal of Marriage & the Family, May 1, 2001, Vol. 63, Issue 2.

Connections

(specific to Douglas County Colorado)

Father Fraternity – (Parker Adventist Hospital) Classes for new dads. Next series of classes begins May 11. Call 303.269.4390 for more information and to register.

RETHINK: Anger Management Classes for Dads – Six session series on Tuesday evenings beginning April 20. Contact fatherwork@douglas.co.us or 720.733.6926 to register.

Take Our Sons and Daughters to Work Day April 22. For more information visit www.daughtersandsonstowork.org and contact your employer.

"You can't be the kind of dad that you want to be. You can't be the kind of dad that you wanted to have. You've got to be the kind of dad that your child needs you to be."
-Roland Warren, The National Fatherhood Initiative

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Fastbreak for Fathers is a publication of the *Douglas County FatherWork Connection*, a countywide, research-based, fathering education and advocacy initiative committed to increasing the probability of every child in Douglas County Colorado being intimately connected to an involved, responsible and loving father or father figure.

**The Douglas County FatherWork Connection is facilitated by
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