

The Work Trip: Some Advice for Reducing Your Family's (and your own) Stress

On a recent work trip, I eavesdropped (How can you avoid it in an airplane?) on the cell-phone pleadings of a distraught thirty-something. I heard something like this:

“No, I won’t be there to tuck you in,” he said with a big sigh. “Daddy needs you to listen to your mother. If you do really well, I’ll have a treat for you when I get home.”

There was some pensive listening on the dad’s end, then: “No, you stop that. If you don’t stop it, I won’t bring you anything.” Frustrated, he said, “Put your mother on the phone.”

As my seat-mate waited, the flight attendant came on the intercom and told us to curtail all cell phone use.

“Listen, honey,” he said, “I can’t fix this from here. You’re just going to have to take care of it. I can’t do everything. They said to turn off the phones now. I’ll see you tomorrow night.” Click. Bigger sigh. Head-shake.

As a recent empty-nester, listening into this bit of family drama brought back a flood of memories and a rush of empathy. As a former business owner and frequent flier, I’ve had many similar conversations during my career. Thinking back over many years of trying to juggle the responsibilities of raising our two children, keeping our marriage healthy, and keeping my business afloat, I wondered if I might have some advice for the frustrated father sitting next to me. From the “been there, done that, made those mistakes” department here’s what I might have told him.

- **Remember, each family member will experience the stress of your travel in his or her own way.** You can’t expect your spouse to see your business trip the same way you do. She or he has his or her own set of worries, priorities, and responsibilities. Sure, your partner gets that your job is important to the family, but do you get that your partner’s responsibilities are just as important? Before you speak, try to see his or her perspective. Your kids also have their perspectives. As you know, it’s hard for them to grasp that anything is more important than they are.
- **Communicate before the trip.** Talk with every family member about the trip before you go. Write down where you’ll be and when and how to reach you. Involve young ones in understanding where you’re going and why. Set regular call times, and ask your partner how you can help make the trip easier on them. Then really listen to his or her advice.
- **Have realistic expectations of what will and what won’t be done while you’re gone.** Some things may have to slide. Don’t expect regular chores and discipline routines to be



followed when you're not there. My wife would often use my trips as a time to do some special activities with the kids that helped her conserve her energy: going out to eat, having special friends over, renting movies, etc. I had to understand that her priority wasn't shoveling the walks or getting the car's oil changed. Those duties could wait until I returned.

- **Resist the guilt-gift habit.** When I first started traveling, I'd return with lavish gifts for my wife and exotic toys for the kids. After several gift-laden returns, my wife sat me down and explained that not only were my gifts costing our family money and me lots of worry trying to top my last purchases, but they made her jealous. She was getting stuck in the role of routine old mom, while I'd assigned myself the role of "sugar daddy." She made me realize the gifts were more about me than about helping the family cope with my absence.
- **Use part of your time away from the family to rebuild your strength.** Okay, treat yourself to a nice meal, a peaceful long bath, a trip to the gym. Renew your energy, because you're going to need it when you get back. Don't feel bad about taking a breath while you're away, with the idea that you will need to afford your partner the same opportunity when you return.
- **When you get home from your trip, be appreciative.** The two most important gifts you can bring home from a business trip are your gratitude and your willingness to jump right back into the fray. Show your appreciation by putting your work away as you taxi to the gate and leaving it in your briefcase once you get home.

Business trips are a necessary part of an increasingly diverse economy. With a little planning, attention, and teamwork your family can make them less stressful. Consider bringing the family along on your work travel now and then. Combining work responsibilities and family fun can give you the best of both worlds.

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