



## Parenting from afar

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### *Opinion piece during COVID-19*

With the global pandemic bringing border closures (both state and international), changing work situations (including more people taking part in fly-in/fly-out work than ever before), we've seen more and more parents spending longer periods of time away from their children, for work reasons.

Some parents are stuck outside of Australia unable to get home; we have a number of clients experiencing this. Others are required to extend their periods of time away to have greater continuity of work in the event a lockdown occurs.

The desire for Mums and Dads to continue to build and enjoy strong relationships with their children whilst away is forefront.

There are many ways to interact with children whilst you are away, to keep the relationship strong and the level of contact enjoyable for both parent and child. It may be FaceTime, any other video calls, text messaging (when the child is old enough), the old-fashioned sending of letters or even phone calls. The modern ways to communicate have greatly assisted parents to stay in touch with their children.

## Preparing your children for your departure

Before you go for your long stint, consider what your child would like if they were missing you. This could include paper to write to you (or draw a picture), photos of favourite times together, an item they need to participate in your favourite activity you do together (for example, a football), phone numbers of how to reach you or a letter written by you.

Of course, all these suggestions are a guide, and your specific choice greatly depends on the developmental stage of your child and what you both enjoy.

Schedule time to spend with your children (and if you can, one on one time) before you go.

If you have the opportunity, leave little post-it notes around their bedroom, in their lunchbox, or inside the swimming goggles case as a reminder that you are thinking of them at different times during the day.

Contact the schoolteacher and let them know you are away and would like the opportunity to be connected to your child's day-to-day activities as much as possible.

Choose a book together and buy two copies. Read the first chapter together before you go. Then divide the book into manageable sizes to read each day whilst you are gone. Save the last segment to read together when your return.

## **Keeping the connection with your child whilst you are away**

Staying connected and having your child engaged in video communication or telephone contact can be difficult when it is multiple days away.

Below are a few ideas of what you can do together (despite the distance) to keep the communication more interesting:

Ask your child what they would like to do when they grow up – then spend time researching that career and finding the unique quirks of that position to talk about.

Support a sporting team, athlete, or club that is in season. Follow the news of that club – player developments, player injuries, scores, team results, opposition developments and use this as a starting point for conversation.

Do exercise together through video chat.

Learn a foreign language together.

Find an appropriate TV program and watch it together.

Through video calls, enjoy a meal together.

Plan time together for when you return – whether it be a weekend away, or going to a movie that is coming out.

Rewrite a children's story and read it to your child.

Share with your child your favourite countries you have visited and then research them together.

Virtually tour your favourite city.

These are just a few ideas to stay connected and provide some variation to your communications.

## **The physical connection**

There is no doubt that the physical connection of children is one of the best parts of being a parent. You never knew how much you could be touched (constantly) until you had children.

Going away, it can be difficult not to long for that physical contact. For your child, they can miss this too.

Whilst there is no substitute for the physical connection, there are a few ways the longing can be mitigated.

Share the same teddy bear (buy one each) and cuddle it whilst you are talking to one another – or at the same time each night.

Talk to your child about what you miss and tell them what you are looking for when you get home.

Make a handmade hug – cut out from fabric your handprint, let your child decorate it.

Send video recordings spontaneously. This could include of you reading to them their favourite book.

Send a care package when your child is feeling particularly down.

Reminisce about old times by sharing old photos.

## **Special occasions**

Special occasions – Christmas, birthdays, and Easter can be more difficult to be away. It is often when family celebrations are had (and therefore missed by the travelling parent).

Do something special for your child on these days. Be organised and send a letter (and gift) in advance so they can open it on their special day.

For you, make sure you celebrate the day in whatever way you can whilst you are working away from family. With a colleague or by yourself, find a way to celebrate.

## **Need help from a family lawyer**

There are many services out there that can assist you with strategies to maintain the connection, including Anglicare, Relationships Australia and private psychologists.

If you are separated, and your former partner is making it more difficult for you to communicate with your children, our team at Meillon & Bright can assist you in negotiating better contact with your children whilst you are away.

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