

## **travelling without your kids**

Some people would never leave their baby for even a night with relatives or friends, whereas members of the British Royal Family seem to have a tradition of popping off on tour for months on end whether they have a baby under 6 months old or a toddler. Some babies are quite happy with short breaks from parents before they're 6 months old but then get more worried. You may need to travel without your baby or kids for work or personal reasons. Each situation has to be judged individually and you know your kid best, but here are a few thoughts.

### **Missing you already**

Extended or repeated breaks will affect the bond you have with your child. This could be temporary or have long-term repercussions. The most important thing is that the kid is looked after by someone with whom they have a bond. (This is why some parents have holidays or weekends away separately, leaving one at home.)

There's an almost equal pull between wanting a child to miss you and wanting them not to. If they miss you but feel safe and are happily occupied, that's okay. You may find that you seem to miss them more than they miss you, but you can't see inside a kid's head. If they're really distressed or constantly sad during your absence, that's obviously in the 'not good' category.

Don't bang on to your child about missing them and being so sad to be away. Talk about the positive things: 'Grandad will come over every afternoon', 'Daddy will read you two stories each night'.

A kid who has bonded with more than one person will be happier when left by a parent because they'll 'transfer' affection to some extent to the on-site parent, other relatives or carers at their child-care centre, kinder or preschool. Attachment theorists believe that babies have a hierarchy of people they're bonded to. Usually Mum is at the top, then Dad and then other friends, family or carers, depending on the family set-up. The absent parent will have to be prepared to possibly be ignored for a while when they get back, but this doesn't happen as often as parents fear.

Set a limit on how long one parent can be absent at any time if possible. Some parents say a week, or three weeks, once a year. In other cases the kid might not see the parent for months on end if the parent is involved with politics or the military, for example.

It's almost always better for the child to stay in their own home while you're

away so that their routine and comfort zones are least disrupted. Get someone to stay with your child rather than send the kid to them.

A child may not want you to go away, but if they feel safe and cared for, and are not themselves disrupted or distressed, then you shouldn't feel bad about leaving for short periods. Kids might want chocolate ice-cream for breakfast too, but that doesn't mean you have to give them everything they want.

The child of a sole parent or two parents who need to go away or the child of someone who must leave suddenly may have the most difficult time. The best option is for a familiar and loving person such as an aunt or grandparent to move into your house, and for the parent (or parents) to either build up the absences (a day or two, a weekend) so the kid understands they always come back soon, or keep the time away as short as possible.

### **Preparing your child**

Depending on your child's personality and stage of development, you'll have to gauge whether to give them a long time to consider the departure, or tell them a couple of days before or the day you leave. One day before probably isn't enough time to prepare for an absence of two weeks. Explain why you're going. You might want to start by saying 'Mummy will be looking after you for two weeks while I have to go away'. Sometimes you might have to hold up fingers to show how many days you'll be away or how many night-time sleeps. Talk about it on a few different occasions and ask your child to tell other people what's going to happen so you can see if they've fully understood. Emphasise that you'll come back.

Very young toddlers don't have much idea of time. As long as they're safe, happy, not out of their routine and have loving people they're used to and their usual environment, they may not notice the difference between two days and a week.

Talk about your plans for the trip and explain what you'll be doing. Show them travel books and websites with pictures of where you're going (this could be a bit hard if it's the inside of a computer room in Siberia).

Arrange it so you can talk to your child on a video computer link, or explain that you'll email photos of yourself on your trip, with the email letters you'll send. Explain carefully how it all works, with the messages arriving in the computer from where you are. Explain how your child can also take photos with a carer at home

then send them to you. Ask if they'll save the drawings they do while you're away and give them a binder of plastic sleeves from the newsagent to keep them in. Provide stickers to put on the front and a special label. You can make a recording of you reading a story if they're not likely to get upset and look for you when they hear your voice.

### **While you're away**

Ring every night or every few days, but don't be annoyed if your child doesn't want to speak to you or breaks off after a quick hello to go and do something else. Kids live in the moment: be happy that they're occupied and fine without you. You can write, phone, email or send digital photos or postcards.

Put a homemade calendar on the wall that covers the trip away. Your child can place a sticker on the right square as each day passes. Some people put up a map or have a globe, but this is best for sophisticated preschoolers, not toddlers.

Don't resent a nanny or child-care worker if your child becomes attached to them, even if the kid accidentally calls them Mummy or Daddy sometimes. (Little kids often get the words mummy and daddy mixed up anyway, and in some respects it's not like using your name – it's a way of showing love and trust to a special person.) If you've chosen to raise your child in a way that means they have several special people, you should respect and be thankful for those bonds, not harm them out of jealousy or self-doubt.

Don't say to your child 'I'll never go away again'.



### **more info on travelling without kids**

**Owl Babies** by Martin Waddell

The mummy owl goes out hunting for food – but she always comes back to her three children.