

going the distance

With business trips now a normal requirement for many parents, how can families keep their bonds intact? asks *Elle Kwan*.

This year, for the first time in 16 years, Lawrence Jang decided to forego Hong Kong's Rugby Sevens. Instead, he was dropping four-year-old Ava at ballet, and taking her twin brother and baby sister to a nearby playroom. The reason? The next evening, he was scheduled to fly to Japan, then Korea for business. Two days later, his kids were off to visit family with their mum in the UK for Easter, and when they got back, he'd already be on another work trip. "I didn't see them for almost two weeks," he says. He might have missed the time spent with friends on his annual outing to the Sevens, but on this occasion, family came first.

Separation anxiety, rebelliousness, and self-esteem issues can all be accredited to parental absence, but work travel is increasingly the norm in Hong Kong. Experts say that effective management is the best course of action and that there are ways to turn what could be a negative experience into a positive.

Family therapist Cindy DeLatour says Lawrence's decision to sacrifice his own time to spend it with his kids will not go unnoticed, and as they grow, he'll see real benefits. "Involved fathers have children with higher self-esteem and fewer behaviour problems, and there are ways to be involved despite your physical absence," she says. Cindy views any departure as a

"deficit" in a child's emotional bank account, so it's important to build credit to store against any loss, she says, and that should begin before a parent leaves.

Ready for take-off

Build in quality time with the children before a trip. Try pushing flights to a Sunday night or take a red-eye flight, to fit in more family time, and spend 30 minutes eating a meal or playing a game together – each will gain one "credit." Other credit-gaining strategies involve talking about what is planned in a child's schedule while Mum or Dad is away, maybe sitting with a calendar and chatting about the activities they'll be doing. You

might even begin a puzzle or Lego project that can be worked on in your absence. Or, for older kids, you could leave out a popcorn treat to accompany a new movie which will be discussed on your return.

Aim for five credits for every one deficit, or absence, says Cindy, and a child's emotional bank account will be full enough to leave them content and loved during the absence. Then, after you return, let your child know you are available and attuned to them, she says.

It's important that kids are aware of the reasons why travel happens, and when to expect it. They should know that work helps a parent provide for the family and benefits them. Since kids thrive on habit, creating

consistent positive experiences ahead of a trip can help cue up a happy departure. Always cooking the same favourite meal together, or going out for a special snack signals that the parent is leaving, but in a positive way.

In-flight

Once a parent has left on a trip, the goal is to keep the connection despite the distance. There are many ways to achieve this. Parent and child can wear a friendship band or other token as a reminder of each other, or you can leave little notes or messages for your child to discover while you're away. Tony Chang works for a large European investment firm that recently launched in Hong Kong. To

help enable the company's transition to this market, he flies frequently back to its European base, as well as across the region. He tracks each trip with son Max, who is eight, via a world map that hangs in Max's room. Just a few months in, Max is showing an interest in the locations his dad visits, so Tony has begun sharing a few facts about each country. He also sends photos of himself at airports or, if he gets a rare chance, of any landmarks, via phone, that his wife then shows to Max. A few of those pictures have been printed and stuck near the map. "In a funny way, it's a kind of learning experience for both of us," Tony says.

According to research, Tony should strive to continue to build on





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this bond as Max gets older. Younger children may get upset at a parent’s leaving because it unbalances their need for control. Older children, though, especially boys, need to see male role models effectively handling stress and difficult situations, like being away. “Up to age nine, values play a strong role in a child’s life. By 11 to 13, when kids are entering puberty, boys are looking for strong male models to imitate,” says Justine Campbell, director of Mindquest Group, which runs courses and programmes for family well-being. Men may feel that connecting with their children is important while the kids are young, but Justine says it’s vital to persist with communication as boys enter their teenage years, even if a son appears to disengage. “They are seeking connection. The key to it is communication,” says Justine.

Sightseeing

The technological age has transformed the way we keep in touch,

and gadgets are an appealing way to keep older children engaged. Justine suggests keeping world clocks visible on a computer or tablet, so kids know what time it is wherever Mum or Dad may be. Mum or Dad, meanwhile, can check Pinterest to keep updated on their child’s interests, or they can share accounts and “pins.” Gaming families might enjoy playing interactive games, keeping online journals that compare schedules, uploading pictures to an online gallery, or using an app like WeChat to record messages that send instantly. “Get involved in your kid’s life whenever you can. Sometimes you just have to get creative,” Justine says.

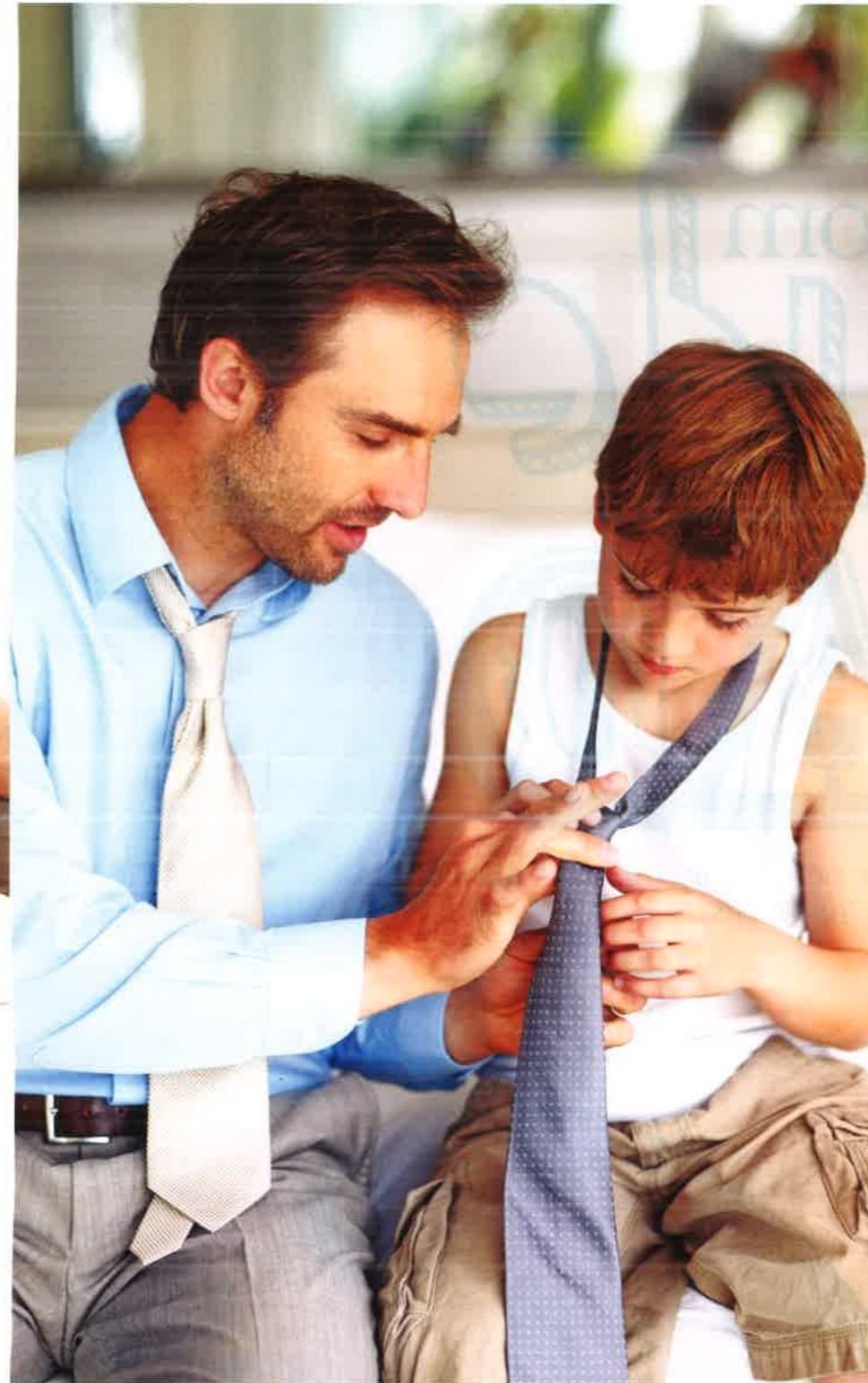
Skype, Facetime and Facebook Chat all make seeing and talking possible, and doubles the benefit, says Justine, of regular voice calls. By dialing at dinner time and putting a tablet up at the table, Mum or Dad can still “dine” with their kids when they’re away. Lost for words? In his book, *101 Ways to be a Long-Distance Super Dad ... or Mom, Too*, author

George Newman suggests conversation starters beyond the everyday. Have an on-going spelling competition, where Mum or Dad provides age-appropriate words for the kids to remember, and kids scour different sources hunting for tricky words to test their parent’s skills. You could also clip an article or fun fact for the kids from an in-flight magazine or newspaper, and send it ahead. Discuss or re-read it during the call. Some parents even dial in for bedtime and read a favourite storybook.

Despite the availability of technology, planning calls and setting up communication needs to be implemented by another primary caregiver – the parent left at home will need to be on board to help connections to flourish. Parents should keep each other in mind, too, when they walk back into the family domain.

Ready to land

Mum or Dad’s return is just as crucial as their departure. “Plan your re-entry




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even if Mum or Dad is halfway across town rather than halfway across the globe – especially if a child appears unsettled or troubled for no other obvious reason. When Karen Beam’s young daughter exhibited sleeplessness on nights her dad wasn’t home, Karen decided to put Facetime to good use.

“She would ask me to tell him to come in and give her a kiss when he got home.” Karen did this, but soon found that Maya, who just turned five, would try and wait it out, not sleeping until her dad returned. Or, if she had fallen asleep and wasn’t aware he was back, she would wake in the middle of the night and go searching for him. “I just felt she wasn’t sleeping as well on the nights he wasn’t there,” says Karen.

She hit on an idea of bringing him into the evening routine using video chat, ringing him up at the office just ahead of bedtime. Now he talks to Maya from his desk, and sometimes even walks her around to “e-meet” colleagues. Karen noticed an instant improvement, with Maya settling quicker once the lights were turned off, and sleeping with fewer interruptions. “Now the only problem we have is remembering to schedule ahead and plan the call,” she says.

With business trips and long working hours eating into family time for so many Hongkongers, learning to manage the situation is crucial. Everyone needs to rally round to make sure that out of sight doesn’t mean out of mind, and get creative to make sure absence makes the heart grow fonder. 

back home. The initial contact as you walk through the door and your child sees your face is important. Your happy face, eye contact and smile all convey: ‘I’m happy to see you!’ and makes a huge difference, bringing a positive feeling and warm greeting to add credit to the bank account,” says Cindy DeLatour.

But the travelling parent should be sensitive to family activities that may be in process. Spend a few minutes catching up with your partner to get up to speed on anything you’ve

missed, and try not to upset their rules. The parent who has been at home has taken on the responsibility of disciplining the kids during the absence, and it’s unfair to play a good cop to their bad cop role upon your return, or to try to appease your guilt by being soft. Rules should remain consistent and intact.

Not every parent, of course, travels. But in Hong Kong, work hours are long, and can frequently keep a parent away from their brood. It’s worth using some of these methods