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Making the Most of Your “Home Time”

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Do you ever feel as though there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish the things you “have to” and “should do,” let alone the things you “want to”? While you might want to increase the amount of time your family spends together, the hands on the clock move very quickly and make it difficult to accomplish. How do you make the most of your time at home together?

Strong families make it a priority to spend time together. Whether it is working on household chores, running errands, or playing a game, they show commitment to each other. When you or your partner spend many hours of the week away from home, it is often more difficult to enjoy time at home because of the pressure to accomplish everything that didn't get done during the week. Research indicates that the partner left at home with children has a more difficult task than those without children. Juggling the multiple schedules and individual needs tends to create greater challenges. Children may feel neglected or disappointed when a parent can't participate in their daily activities. Communication is key to helping them understand the choices and evaluate the expectations. Talk about what you can do with them and how to keep in touch when you are away.

You need to ask yourself several questions:

- Why is your family so busy?
- Are the activities or involvements helping to strengthen your family, or are they causing you to spend more time apart?
- Is your lifestyle really worth it? What are your choices? Why are you making this decision?
- How can you best manage your time?

As an individual and as a part of a family, you will have times when things seem to go smoothly and times when the “apple cart” upsets. As you talk about what is important to you, hopefully you can identify the times in life when certain issues need attention and prioritize your actions. When you are with your family you can manage that time so others don't infringe on it. You can make a concerted effort to accomplish the “chores” along with the “treasured times.” Establishing a homecoming routine can be an important part of adjusting to this lifestyle. If your partner is working a job that requires travel and he or she is only home on weekends, talk about how you want to spend the time so that expectations are known and discussed. If you are the spouse who travels, another key to success is being able to plan for the time away and supporting the decisions that are made in your absence. Even if it might not have been the one you would have made, encourage your support and make plans for the next time.

Here are some tips from truck drivers and their spouses for making the most of your time at home.

- Use a monthly calendar that shows when others will be home.
- During this time try not to schedule outside commitments. Spend it doing things together as a family. If your schedule is subject to change, try to be flexible in routine schedules. Plan things that can be done on the spur of the moment. Keep a notebook of special events to do, or wishes from the children.
- Don't overlook special opportunities because of housework or laundry. If your partner is only home for a few

days before leaving again, have a second set of clothes packed so that your time together is not spent in the laundry room.

- Rotate or take turns, with “overlap” time—time when most people are home—for everyone to get to do something special. Depending on the ages of your children, just being home might be a welcomed time together. If you have teenagers, they may have a special project or activity that you might participate in. For example, dad gets to choose the activity every fourth month, etc.
- Be realistic with your expectations. Be honest in your feelings. Talk about what is working and what isn’t. If it has been a really tough week, tell family members. Be honest about what you can and cannot do. Also remember not to make promises you can’t keep; make every effort to uphold your word. Seek help from others who may have experience, like others from the job site who have been successful, or ask for assistance from human resources.
- Try to accomplish routine/regular chores before or after “family time.” Sometimes this is a good way to ease back into family life. Cooking a meal together, taking a walk, or working on a project might be a way to get caught up if the time away hasn’t been extensive. Establishing a routine for the departure and re-entry into family life is another key to success.
- Maximize time together by having a list of items to discuss. Use a calendar or notepad to write things down as they happen and what you want to share. E-mail and cell phones make keeping in touch easy, if service is provided and the partner is accessible.
- Value the time of conversation. Turn off the TV and set aside time to really engage with your partner and children. Brainstorm how to make things easier for them during your absence and to help you as you come back into their lives.
- Relate the ups and downs of the week. Show appreciation for the jobs each family member has done to make it through another week. Talk about the “what if’s” and make a plan. If the car needs a mechanic, where do you take it for repairs? If the hot water tank breaks, what plumber do you call? Home maintenance becomes a large issue when one person must make the calls. Plan ahead for preventative maintenance and come to a consensus on how to handle the unexpected.
- Share with family members, through pictures or postcards, what differences and similarities from home you

experienced during the past week. Share the favorite place you traveled and why, favorite food, and more.

Remember to maintain a positive attitude. While this is not always easy to manage with one partner away and returning, using some of these suggestions that have helped long distance truckers is a step in the right direction. The research and feedback from families that live this lifestyle say that if the partner at home is managing OK, then the family as a whole will cope better.

But if the attitude isn’t positive, or becomes overwhelming, what will need to change? How long can you continue? Is it really worth it? Remember, with each separation each person in the family adapts to this lifestyle in their own way. Keep common goals in line to target why this job or lifestyle is important. When things go well, write it down so that you can repeat it; when things don’t work, remember that too. Every family is different. Communication and honesty are essential keys to making it work for you and your family.

Children will grow and adapt too. Reenter slowly with expected changes. Ask children questions that can’t be answered with “yes” or “no” to stimulate conversation. For example, “What book did you read today?” or “Show me how you did that.” Try to develop routines that include one-on-one time with each child during your time at home. Plan something special that they can look forward to, such as reading a bedtime story for young children or attending a school event with an older child.

If separations are expected, have a designated schedule of things to accomplish during the time together. Treat each other to a special event or a tradition to look forward to. You could plan an activity your whole family enjoys doing together, such as a hobby, a collection, hiking, biking, camping, a sporting event, or a picnic. This activity will serve as a point of conversation and give an easy way to “reenter” family life again.

However, quality family time does not have to be a special or planned activity. It does need to be time that is approached with a positive attitude to share and to “pull the family back together” after the events of the week and work have stretched it beyond its limits.

Appreciation and respect must be related to the two partners who are making this lifestyle work. Accent the positive, work on the challenges, and realize that time will help teach both of you how this will work for your family. Choose one or two things to work on each month and make some gradual changes so that you and your family will enjoy and benefit from the time at home.

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