



HYG-5173-09

# Parenting Apart

Doris I. Herringshaw, Ed.D., CFCS, Wood County, Ohio State University Extension

As a working parent, you may need to travel for your job, take a position located in a different city or state, or put in a lot of overtime. All of these situations interfere with the amount of time you can spend with your children. If you need to be away from your children, there are simple ways for you to stay in touch with them and even strengthen your bond with them while you are away. You should begin with a simple explanation about why you are going away and what you will be doing while you are gone. Although it may not be simple for your children to understand, they will figure out you still care about them.

While no one can exactly predict how a child will react to the absence of a parent, it is obvious that it is a stressful time. Depending on age, temperament, and personality, your child's reactions to your absence may vary from shy and clingy to temper tantrums or reverting to childlike behaviors. You should adjust your parenting style to your child's temperament, although this does not mean you accept any kind of behavior. Also, keep in mind that your actions may not work in every situation.

Knowing the developmental, social, and emotional stages of children at different ages can help you better understand your child's reactions and help you deal appropriately with the situation. The following sections of this fact sheet give you some guidelines for the different age groups and for gaining confidence with your children when you return home.

## Infants

Infants tend to cry, fuss, and pull away from a returning parent. Even a short absence can cause the child to not recognize the returning parent. Children may react by clinging to the parent who has always been present and treating the other parent as a stranger.

In most cases, you can slowly regain your child's confidence by talking to him or her. Your infant will then recognize your voice. Remember this may take some time, but your child will gradually remember you. Be patient.

## Toddlers and Preschoolers

Toddlers and preschoolers play independently around other children and may be content to play alone if near an adult. When you return home, this age group may demand more personal attention and constant connection with you by asking for help and having conversations with you. You need to praise toddlers and preschoolers and acknowledge them and their accomplishments. Toddlers may feel guilty because they may believe they made you leave. They may also experience separation anxiety. A toddler may play games with you by offering you a toy and then failing to release it. Your toddler or preschooler may revert to childlike behaviors in order to gain your attention. Most toddlers will whine and be fussy. You may have to prove you are really the parent and that you belong in the household. Children may test both

parents by demanding more attention than usual and pushing the limits.

### **Elementary School Children (Ages 6–8)**

Children of this age may actually dread your return. They like being the center of attention and having exclusive conversations with one parent and they realize things are different when the absent adult returns. Despite this, your child may demand lots of attention when you return. Elementary school children may complain of stomach cramps and headaches in response to an adult returning. Children in early elementary school may act out their anger or may be shy around you when you return home. Children may also become competitive, blaming, and moody or may talk a lot to gain approval and attention.

### **Elementary School Children (Ages 9–11)**

Preteens are usually very social and prefer to spend time with their friends. They learn acceptable behavior patterns and consequences of bad behavior from their peer relationships. A mother is very important in their life yet the preteen begins to pull away from parents and show interest in forming friendships as they get older. This is the age when you can expect your child to ask you to drop him or her off two blocks from the school to gain approval of peers.

Preteens need lots of reminders and have not developed a good concept of time. They are impatient and begin to challenge rules and limits set by adults. Preteens may be bossy, competitive, and involved in team activities. Preteens crave time with friends and are independent but they also want periods of time alone. If you are the parent of preteens, they may ignore you completely when you return home or they may challenge you to the limits or talk constantly to gain approval.

### **Teens**

Teenagers are going through life-changing experiences that cause them stress and anxiety. They are concerned about their new body and their new voice. Teens usually have additional responsibilities and rules when a parent is away from home. They may try to avoid communication with you and challenge your knowledge. Some teens crave being alone. They

want to be independent and resent being told what to do. These children may be excited about the returning adult. Many teens set self-imposed standards that they cannot live up to and are disappointed when things don't work out. They tend to get angry but have not learned how to direct anger in a socially acceptable way. Their anger may cause them trouble in school or the community.

### **Ideas for Communicating While You Are Away**

- To make certain your child does not forget you and knows who you are, print little sticky notes and place them strategically so they will be found while you are gone. Phone calls specifically to talk to the child make him or her more comfortable with your absence.
- In this electronic age there are no excuses for not staying in touch. Younger children yearn for the opportunity to use the computer. It is a perfect way for teens to stay in touch with you. Communications can be kept brief. You and your child can reply on your own schedule, and this allows you to check in without the feeling of checking up on teens. Even text messaging teens can keep in touch. If you don't know how to text, your teen can show you. It does have a fee but it may turn out to be the best communication tool with some family members. Using technology can anchor traveling parents to their families.
- Technology is fine but having something less abstract may be important, too. A piece of paper with your signature on it, a picture, or a rock that you and your child picked up together can be constant reminders that can go in backpacks and gym bags.
- Find little ways to let your children know you are thinking of them while you are gone and your return home may be an easy arrival.
- Ask your children to save pictures or draw a picture for you while you are away.

### **Guidelines for When You and Your Children Reunite**

- Be patient and go slow when returning to your children. Be aware of their actions and be flexible, but don't be a pushover.

- Allow time to communicate with each child individually. Be sure to ask questions that build relationships and that show you are interested in their activities and feelings. Each child should feel special.
- Give children your undivided attention. Sit at their level and make eye contact. Don't argue or correct, just listen. Send clear and encouraging messages. Be patient and calm.
- Let children know you are proud of their accomplishments. Proudly display pictures they made and talk about the pictures and the feelings that go with the pictures.
- Even when difficult situations occurred while you were away, don't start with discipline and rules. Make changes gradually and point out the positive changes in the rules or new enforcement. Present a united front with other adults who have been parenting while you were away.
- Don't send the children away so you can have an intimate reunion with your spouse or partner. It is important to reaffirm the bond with your children. You and your significant other can plan your special time for later.
- Be patient and try to rest so that you can communicate positively with your children of any age.

Research shows that parents who report high work pressure and role overload had more conflict with adolescents. So, patience is crucial. Knowing some expected behavior will help you through the first few awkward moments that occur upon return. Your child probably wonders how those first few moments will be as much as you do.

## References

- Bilchik, S. (2007). *Staying in Touch with Your Kids When You're Out of Town*. Child Welfare League of America.
- Missouri Department of Education. (1983). *How Does Your Child Grow and Learn?* Reprinted for Ohio State Department of Education.
- Oliver, K., & Min, K. (1993). *Middle Childhood—8 to 11 year olds*. The Ohio State University.
- Parke, R. (2004). "Development in the Family." *Annual Review Psychology*, 55 (1), 365–399. Academic search database.
- Shaklee, H. *Parenting Apart: A Guide for Separated and Divorced Parents*. University of Idaho Cooperative Extension, Family Life Development Specialist. Retrieved from <http://www.agls.uidaho.edu/fcs/docs/Parenting-apart.doc>

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension

TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868