

Take it slow when returning home after being away

My husband started a new job that requires a lot of travel. He will come home just before Christmas. What can we do to make sure his return is welcome, not stressful, for our young children?

You're wise to recognize that not all home-comings are sugar and spice. Different children react differently to separations like this; some experience quite a bit of anxiety, which can reveal itself in a myriad of ways while the parent is away.

But things don't automatically return to normal when the missing parent returns. Depending on the circumstances, the length of time of the separation, and the individuals involved, a parent's return could result in even more stress than his or her departure.

First, do your best to make sure your children understand why their dad is away. Of course, it's best to have this conversation before a parent leaves the household, but it doesn't hurt to talk about it during the separation, too. For example, sometimes toddlers feel they've done something to make the parent go away and feel guilty as a result. You'll want to alleviate those feelings as much as possible.

Children of different ages typically exhibit specific patterns of behavior when a parent arrives home after an extended absence. Here's what you might expect in younger children:

- Toddlers and preschoolers may demand personal attention from dad, and want to be with him constantly. They may whine and



be more fussy than usual. Preschoolers may revert to younger-child behavior, and may test limits with both parents.

- Young elementary school children (ages 6 to 8) may actually dread the return of the absent parent because the routine they've established will be interrupted and they may realize they will lose attention. These children may act out in ways that demand attention by being competitive, blaming and moody, or they may be more verbal than usual. They may also complain of stomach cramps or headaches.

For a smoother homecoming, returning parents should consider these guidelines:

- Be patient and flexible with the children, but not a pushover. Take things slow.
- Set aside time for each child individually. Be sure to ask them questions and be interested in their activities and feelings.
- Go easy on the discipline. If rules need to be adjusted now that you're back, make changes gradually.
- Don't shun the children to have an intimate reunion as a couple. Plan a special "parents' reunion" a bit later.

For more information, see the Ohio State University Extension "Home and Away" series fact sheet, "Reconnecting with the Kids," online at <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5198.html>.

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Dear Subscriber: This column was reviewed by Doris Herringshaw, family and consumer sciences educator for OSU Extension in Wood County.

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