

THE QUIET EPIDEMIC

I recently undertook a business trip to Peru. As a travel doctor, I successfully avoided the Inca's curse brand of travellers diarrhoea, however I was exposed to something potentially much more serious - an epidemic which is quietly exploding amongst many business travellers - no matter where they go.

The glamorous reputation of business travel is often undeserved - particularly for travellers who happen to be parents. As the mother of two small daughters, I discovered that business trips can easily turn into guilt trips. In fact some time ago a study of World Bank employees stated one of the major stressors of travel was worrying how things were going at home. In my case I was not really worried about the standard of care the children's loving father would be doling out. I just missed them, and felt somehow I should be home.

Other parents who find themselves juggling business trips, birthdays and school concerts can take heart from a recent study of travelling parents in the US. There is a growing determination that work doesn't always come first.

Sixty seven percent of those surveyed had refused to go on a business trip because it conflicted with children's activities. Just over 40 percent said they would cut business short for a child's birthday or illness. Nearly a third refuse to travel if it clashes with a school function. The study also found that men were more likely to be lonely on the road and miss their spouse, while women were more likely to feel guilty about being away from the children. However, women enjoyed the break from the kids and family routines twice as much as men.

Whilst there are no local studies, the feelings of Australian business travellers are likely to be similar. The three P's of travelling parents used to be Postcards, Phonecalls and Presents. These days technology gives even more options to keep the communication channels open. Here are a few thoughts

Before you go

- Involve the children in the planning. Tell them where you are going, look it up on a map, get them books or pictures of where you are going.
- Let them help you pack.
- Get them to do a drawing or give you a small toy to take with you
- Give them a calendar so they can tick off the days while you are away
- Give them a disposable camera so they can take pictures of what happens at home
- Tape some bedtime stories so they can listen to them while you are away.

While away

- Take some pictures of their toy or drawing in unusual locations.
- Photograph things they would enjoy, to show them when you get home.
- As well as telephone calls and post we now have fax, and emailing of text and pictures
- Presents - they are best if they are small - or a dangerous precedent is set for the regular traveller - I know someone who buys them before they go.

When you get home

- Schedule time to sit down and hear about their activities at home
- Resist the temptation to let kids get away with bad behaviour because you have been away
- Don't forget to make a fuss of your partner when you get home - and support them for their parenting decisions. (On this trip I came home to find my spouse had been giving coco-pops to our 5 year old as a reward for being dry at night! - What could I say - it worked!)

Juggling family and work travel will never be easy. Families usually work out the best solution for them. Going away for short periods will not harm the children if everything else is OK - in fact it may be worth going away for a few days just to get the fantastic 'welcome home' greeting!