

## While I'm Away

**One mom's strategies for easing her children's (and her own) separation anxiety during her first major trip away from them**

BY LISA YAKOMIN

### Idea of the Month

**Last year**, my husband, Rich, and I decided to celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary with a second honeymoon. Even though our destination was Paris, a place I'd always wanted to visit, I had trouble getting excited about the trip because it would also mark my first extended period of time away from our three children.

When we shared our plans with the kids, my oldest daughter, Christina, age seven, immediately grilled us about how long we'd be

gone (five days) and who would stay with them (my parents), and wondered aloud why we didn't want her to come along. My five-year-old, Amy, cried inconsolably, filled with fear ("Will you like it so much you don't want to come back?"), doubt ("Who's going to kiss me good night?"), and a seemingly endless supply of "What ifs" ("What if I have a bad dream and can't get back to sleep?"). Assuring her that Grandma and Grandpa were more than capable did nothing to allay her concerns.

The only child I didn't worry about was my one-year-old, Cathy. Having settled into a schedule, she was now a creature of habit. As long as my parents followed Cathy's usual itinerary of meals, naps, and playtime, she'd be fine. If only the rest of the family could be more like her, I thought. That's when I realized that the secret to a successful separation would be making the girls' temporary new routine special, while maintaining the comfort of the old one.

The first thing I did, about a week before our trip, was set one clock to Paris time. At different hours of the day, the girls and I talked about "what children in France are doing right now." For example, when we had breakfast, the children in France were already dressed and finished with lunch. Sometimes, we pretended we were French too, reading a bedtime story at two in the afternoon (*Madeline* was a favorite) or substituting a sandwich for pancakes at breakfast. This not only taught the girls about time zones, but it also gave them a sense of perspective while we were away. They understood that Rich and I couldn't call them at their bedtime because it was the middle of the night for us. Instead, when we called them at 7 A.M. EST, they immediately asked, "So, how was lunch?"

Another game we played before we left involved showering each child with Catch-up Kisses. These were all of the kisses they would get if we were going to be home. For example, "Here's your good-morning-Friday kiss, and your have-fun-today kiss,





## My Great Idea

and your just-because-I-feel-like-it kiss.” Of course, the game quickly escalated into a litany of ridiculous excuses to give them even more kisses than usual (“Here’s your Amy-loves-pickles kiss!” or “Oh, Mommy, don’t forget my because-you-put-your-socks-on-right kiss!”). Catch-up Kisses gave my children that much-needed extra dose of love and attention in the days leading up to our departure.

One of the more specific problems I wanted to solve was Amy’s concern about her bedtime. Every night, Rich and I tuck her in and talk about all of the good dreams she has to look forward to in the night ahead. I knew she would miss this comforting ritual, so I thought up a way for her to feel our presence even when we weren’t physically there. I set aside some of Rich’s cotton undershirts for Amy to wear as pajamas while we were gone, something I often do myself when my husband is away on business trips. “Wow,” Amy beamed, “it’ll be like wearing a hug from Daddy all night!”

The day we left, Rich and I also lent each of the girls one pillow from our bed. We told them that we had filled the pillows with enough special, happy dreams to last the whole time we were away. Sure enough, when we called to check in, they had great fun telling us about their Mommy or Daddy dreams: “Mommy, I had a dream I was doing laundry!” or “I had a golf dream, Daddy!”

In anticipation of what I thought might be the toughest moment for the kids (and for me), the moment when Rich and I said goodbye and headed for the door, I prepared a *pièce de résistance* distraction. A few minutes before our car service picked us up, I told the girls that I’d planted clues throughout the house for a special treasure hunt. Then I handed them an envelope with a map in it telling them where the first clue was. (I also made sure my mother knew where all the clues were hidden, just in case there was a snag.) The only catch: the kids couldn’t start the hunt until we left.

Well, suddenly the moment wasn’t so tough — for the kids, at least! They

couldn’t kick us out the door fast enough. “Okay, Mommy and Daddy, time for you to go now,” they sang out in unison. Once we drove away, they tore around the house, finding clues that eventually led to a big “treasure”: two new videos, stickers, and some craft kits that were sure to keep them busy.

The only drawback was that the kids enjoyed the thrill of the hunt a little too much — more than the prizes, in fact. “C’mon, Grandma,” they pleaded for days afterward, “make more clues.” My parents did their best to accommodate the children, but each day they demanded grander searches, running their grandparents a bit ragged in the process. Next time, I’ll either leave behind a few days’ worth of smaller treasure hunts or come up with equally fun activities that their sitters can more easily supervise in my absence.

When they weren’t begging for more treasure hunts, Christina and Amy were playing photojournalist. A day before we left, I’d equipped them with a Polaroid camera and five packs of film, one for each day we were away. I explained that their job was to document what they did so that Rich and I wouldn’t miss anything. This helped them look forward to new experiences while we were away, rather than fear the unexpected, since they were always hoping for something out of the ordinary to photograph.

When Rich and I returned, the children loved showing us their snapshots of Grandpa eating his first peanut butter and banana sandwich, Grandma putting a disposable diaper on the baby backward, and all of the other fun and silly things they all did. Rich and I enjoyed viewing their souvenir photos more than our own!

My mother unveiled my final trick just a few hours before Rich and I were due home. It was a secret stash of poster board, glue, glitter, and markers — everything the kids needed to make big, beautiful “Welcome Home Mom and Dad” signs. My parents agreed that it helped provide a sense of excitement and anticipation, and more importantly, it kept the children busy during those difficult last hours of waiting for us to return.

It’s safe to say that the entire family enjoyed our Paris getaway thanks to these simple games and activities. Since returning home, I’ve used several of the ideas during Rich’s business trips and more typical day-to-day separations. Now, if Rich and I go out for a few hours at night, we’ll dole out Catch-up Kisses and sprinkle happy dreams into the children’s pillows in case we’re not back in time to

tuck them in. Better still, my girls have started using these strategies on *me*. As she turned to leave for a play date at a friend’s house the other day, Amy handed me her favorite blanket. “Here,” she said, “you can cuddle with this while I’m gone. I put love in it.”

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