

last minute details of the departure. And, be sure (as sure as you can be in this life) that you will be on time picking up a returning child and ask any adults meeting your child to do the same.

A Few Practical Considerations:

If you value something very much (a special toy, shirt, etc.) try not to send it with the child. A trip away from home is hard enough without having to worry about losing a special item. Send a list of things you would like to be returned to help your child remember. If your child needs child care or the people who are caring for your child need up-to-date information on children's services in their area, BANANAS belongs to a network (across the USA) of information and referral agencies. There may be one where your child is going, call us!

Homesick Blues:

So what do you do if your child (after all your preparation) calls you up crying and wants to come home? Again — this is an individual decision and should be up to you and the people your child is visiting, as well as the child. Each family is different.

Suggestions include telling your child to try it a little longer and see if it works out. Talk about how it is hard at first, but there will be pleasant days ahead. Encourage your child to talk about specific things bothering him. If the visit is to be a short one, remind your child how soon she will be coming home. Be sure that the adults are aware of your child's feelings and, if appropriate, encourage them to talk with your child. Some children will be honest with you, but not with other adults. Finding some playmates the child's age may also help ease a difficult situation.

Take the opportunity to reassure your child that you do love him, but be honest about commitments like airplane reservations (i.e. the ticket is for a 10 day stay) and your responsibilities back home while the child is away. With some children it might be better not to communicate too often by phone — reminding them of you and home may make things worse. But, some children will need you to spend a fortune on phone calls. Mail still seems to be the best way to keep in touch. If you have more than one child away from home and staying in the same place, mail separate letters/cards in the same envelope — preventing the possibility of one child's receiving something the other one doesn't.

While you can't guarantee your child will have a wonderful time, a little pre-planning helps to smooth the way. We hope this Handout has been useful to you in your preparations. Bon Voyage!

BANANAS HANDOUT

Preparing Your Child For A Visit Away From Home

“I’m sending my son for a visit with his father in another state and I guess the true impact of the divorce is hitting me now. I really don’t want my son to go, but I know he should. He wants to see his father, he misses him and was used to seeing him often. I know that my son is a little worried about the time he will spend away from me. Some days he accuses me of just sending him away so I can have a good time. I’ll feel good about having free time, but I don’t want my son to feel rejected. Another concern I have is his father — this visit brings back all the problems of the marriage. Can I trust this man? Will he remember all the important things? I am really a wreck — can’t even plan for the trip or sort out what and how I should prepare my child.”

Whenever summer or holidays approach, many parents call us to talk about the practical side of planning for children traveling alone, and to share their worries, dilemmas and concerns such as those expressed by this mother. Some children are off to grandparents:

“I’m worried that my child will swear in front of my father; he’ll have a fit.” “What if my daughter won’t eat what my mother cooks — that was such a problem when I was growing up.” “My mother-in-law invited my children to visit her, but she works during the day. Who will take care of them?”

And some parents are leaving their children behind:

“How will I find a reliable caregiver?” “Is it really worth all the effort to plan just to get away for a short time? Once I left him with my very best friend, someone he really knew and liked, and I’m still paying for that outing; he clings to me and cries.”

What's a parent to do? Here are some suggestions (tried and true) which hopefully will help you plan.



Preparing Your Child Emotionally For A Journey:

“My son, a very social and well-traveled seven year old, was afraid to fall asleep on his first solo airplane trip to visit Grandpa, because he thought he might not wake up.”

Explain clearly what is going to happen and when it will happen during the actual trip so that there will be as few unexpected events as possible for your child. Talk about all the particulars — the plane, train, bus, how long the trip will be, how many stops there will be, who will be waiting when the child arrives. Role playing is helpful. One idea: make a calendar with your child of the days she will be gone and write in what might be happening each day. For non-readers use pictures. Another idea: write a story with your child about whom she is visiting, what you will be doing while the child is away, and about your reunion at the end of the trip. Hang up the story and read it together. A diary for the child to use during the trip also works well (encourage drawings and pictures as well as text).

Spend some time preparing your child and the people your child is visiting for each other. Show pictures of the people to your child and talk about them as much as you can. This is a good time to share childhood memories if these people are from your youth. Be honest and clear about what the people are like and your relationships with them:

“Your Aunt and I have been through a lot of troubles together — like once I was very sick and she helped me get well.”

Try to be as positive as possible. Accept any feelings your child may have about the people being visited. It's important for parents to remember that they are the grown-ups and that a child needs to feel good about both parents. Don't let your own fear or distrust of an ex-spouse spill over to your child:

“Mommy does have a new husband and child who you will get to know. You don't know them yet and it feels scary to go somewhere new, but you will get to know them and do lots of fun things together.”

If there are differences in lifestyle, explain them. Tell your child that Grandpa doesn't like swearing or that Grandma will want you to be clean most of the time. If you trust the people your child is visiting, many potential areas of conflict will work themselves out between your child and the other adults. Just prepare your child for the fact that different adults expect different behavior and responses from children. Age may be one important factor to introduce. Suggest to your child that older people may tire more easily or may have daily schedules very different from the one your child is accustomed to. Children are usually quite flexible when the reasons are explained and they know what to expect.

Help your child realize that you love him and that you will be waiting at the end of the trip. Send an early letter to your child which will be waiting when he arrives. Keep in contact with cards and notes, or plan times for a telephone call. Send along a picture of yourself and other important people as reminders of home which can provide comfort and possibly alleviate homesickness (“out of sight, out of mind” is not true in this case). Let your child take along a special toy, stuffed animal or something of yours if necessary. Prepare well in advance by choosing clothes and packing the suitcase together. Make these preparations part of the trip. Send along a tape of you reading a favorite story or singing your ritual “good night” songs.



Talk to those adults who will be primarily responsible for your child and explain any special physical or emotional needs like allergies, food preferences, bedtime rituals, etc. Do this when your child is present (if possible) so that the child sees a connection between you and the people to be visited —even if only by telephone. Send along a note reminding your child and the others of important concerns, like “make sure you go to the bathroom before bedtime” or “remember you are very allergic to poison oak.” Make arrangements for your child or the responsible adults to call you at the time of arrival.

Remember to talk often with your child about what is going to happen on the trip while the child is away. Find out what your child really feels about the adventure. Reassure and comfort the child if she has worries and fears. Discuss any fears and try not to add your own to the discussion. Listen carefully and explain that going away makes all of us feel a little worried as well as excited. If you are travelling and your child is remaining at home, prepare in the same way with your caregiver. If the caregiver is new to you and your household, plan pre-trip times for the child and the caregiver to get to know one another.

Preparing For A Safe Journey:

There are hazards, but children (even pre-schoolers) can travel alone safely if prepared well. Be sure your child knows that it is all right to talk to some strangers (like flight attendants, conductors) about particular needs (being hungry, going to the bathroom). Explain that these people are supposed to be helpful and available for questions. Pin an information card on clothing or suitcase (it can be inside clothing to save embarrassment) stating the child's name, age, the name of the adult who will be meeting the child and who to call in an emergency. Include any necessary emergency health information. You will be asked to give similar information to the flight attendant on airplane trips. Airline, train and bus companies want to know when a child is traveling alone. They don't mind a call (or two) ahead for additional information and most will let you go on board with your child. Plan to arrive at the terminal early to handle any