

On The Road Again. Parenting when dad is away a lot

By John Hoffman

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Michael Barner and his family said goodbye many times during his 32-year military career, but those were the parting words that broke his heart. On that Monday morning, 30 years ago, Barner was leaving home in Comox, B.C. to head for Chilliwack, where his work would take him for most of every week that summer. His ride had arrived and he was getting into the car when his four-year-old son came running down the driveway. No tears, no clinging, just a simple plea for an everyday father-son activity. An arrow to the gut. "If he'd made a normal fuss it wouldn't have been as difficult," Barner says, "Sean was smart, you know. He knew it had to be something concrete in order to have a chance to get me to stay. That's what got me. It was a very helpless feeling. There's your child asking for your love and attention and you can't give it."

Barner is hardly the first father to spend significant amount of time away from his family because of work. And it's not just dads who are away these days (see "Long-distance Mama," p. 5). But while an increasing number of women are facing tough career choices that take them away from family, more often than not this is a predicament of fatherhood. And it's challenging – kids miss dad, mom gets stressed and lonely from doing it all on her own and, as we've seen, the parting brings sweet sorrow. The return isn't happy hugs and kisses, either.

One morning last fall, four-year-old Parise Leclerc awoke to her mother's excited suggestion, "Go look in your bed. [Parise had slept with her mom that night.] Somebody special is sleeping there. I think maybe Papa is home!"

Parise went and peeked in the doorway but her mom heard no excited squeals, no thumping of feet to signify that her daughter was running over to pounce on her sleeping father. Instead, Parise reappeared a moment later, looking perplexed. "She seemed almost numb," recalls her mother, Julie Gauthier of Penetanguishene, Ontario. "Parise doesn't adapt well and she likes lots of explanations about what's going to happen. Andre being in her bed really seemed to throw her off".

Andre Leclerc works as a marine navigator on ships in the Great Lakes and, except for a midsummer vacation, is gone most of the time from March until December. Last October, he had an unexpected eight days off while waiting for his next ship to arrive, so he hastened home for a little impromptu vacation. But when he awoke that first morning, instead of hugs and an excited "Hi, Daddy," Leclerc was confronted with a little girl in tears asking, "Why are you sleeping in my bed?" Leclerc says, "You've visualized walking through that front door, many, many times. And you picture it as this wonderful reunion. Then bang, it doesn't happen. It was extremely disappointing."

After her first setback. Parise continued to be a little standoffish for the first day or so. Then she began to lash out. "She would tell me, 'Get back on the ship!'" Leclerc recalls.

Parise's attitude lasted for most of her father's stay – hardly the "quality time" he was hoping for.

Things usually go better than that, but Leclerc is not the first returning gatherer to be treated like, well, an intruder. "This is what we call reunion stress," says Genella Macintyre, a counselor at the Family Resource Centre at CFB Shilo, near Brandon, Manitoba. "Although it's very exciting to have daddy at home again, it's also a big adjustment. So this may be the time a preschooler acts out her anger that daddy went away. An older child may react by showing off or talking non-stop to the returning parent. A baby may not even recognize his father. Even though everyone wants it to be a happy time, things don't always go smoothly at first."

Bridging the Distance

"If he's go to go, he's got to go, but try to keep the connection," advises early childhood educator Lorraine Barner. "If dad can't be there in the flesh, he can at least be familiar. Put up pictures of him in your child's room and keep talking about him even though he's away." Barner's husband used to send cassette tapes to his children so they could hear his voice. He'd tell them stories he'd made up about a character named Johnny who was always finding himself in little moral dilemmas.

The children would make tapes for their father, too. "One time they recorded the toilet flushing," says Lorraine. "And I can remember when our middle son, Ed, was about five, he would take the tape recorder into the playhouse we'd made out of a big cardboard box. He would always start out by saying in a deep gravelly voice, 'It's Ed here. You can probably tell by the voice. I'm in my box.' They had a lot of fun making those takes." Ed, now 30, remembers looking forward to the arrival of his dad's tapes. "When the tapes came it was great. It was like having a little piece of him."

Barner and her children kept track of the days by playing what they called the toothpick game. "We had two egg cups," she recalls. "One had a toothpick for every day he would be away and each day we'd put a toothpick in the other cup." Another idea for school-aged children is to put up a map so that they can see where dad is and chart his journey.

Diana Webb and her husband, David, keep in touch by e-mail, pick-me-up postcards and phone calls when he's in port. They also bought a camcorder so Diana can record as many milestones and events as possible in their son's life, and she has set up a family Web page so David can sneak a peak at his little guy when he's away. "It has a picture of Austen and a little blurb about him," she explains. "I'm expanding it and eventually we'll have a small photo gallery."

Ed Barner advises parents to be completely open and honest with children. "Tell your kids exactly what's going on, exactly when dad will be back. And tell them he'll be communicating with them as much as he can," he suggests, adding that fathers should make sure they hold their end of the bargain.

David Webb a member of the Canadian Navy, has experienced this. When his son, Austen, was three months old, Webb began attending Fleet School in Esquimalt, B.C., which meant he was only home in Courtenay on weekends (the Webbs now live in Victoria). Further training took him to Halifax for a month. Then came a six-month deployment in the Persian Gulf. That's a lot of time away from your first baby. Webb missed out on Austen learning to crawl, cutting his first tooth and taking his first steps.

When he got home last December, Webb had an awkward time with his one-year-old son. "Diana brought Austen down to meet the ship, but at first he wouldn't come to me," he recalls. "Eventually, her arms got tired and she just handed him over saying, 'Daddy needs to hold you now.'" "Once in dad's arms Austen pulled his head back and regarded his father cautiously, as babies often do with strangers.

This is normal, according to early childhood educator Lorraine Barner, who also happens to be Michael Barner's wife. "This is a prime age for making strange," she says. "At daycare I've sometimes seen babies cling to their caregiver when mom or dad comes to pick them up at the end of the day." She says her husband missed nine months out of the first year of their youngest son's life. "I can remember a time David obviously didn't know Michael when he came home. It really hurt Michael, but he understood.

Barner says kids and dads can and do reconnect, but it takes time to warm up. "Go with the baby's cues," she advises. "It's best to let the baby come to you when she's ready. Some are slower to warm up than others and, of course, the longer dad has been away, the longer it will probably take. It's hard to be patient, but unless the child is ready you'll be going against her natural instinct to be wary." Barner adds that this becomes less of an issue as children get older and it's easier to help them stay connected to an absent parent.

Reconnecting is not the only issue when a father returns. There's also a bit of social/culture shock. When Webb came home for a two-week holiday last August, partway through his Persian Gulf stint, he threw a wrench into the family works, "I had fallen into a set of routines with Austen," says Diana, "and when David came home, they were all disrupted. And having him at home was more work for me because I had another person to take into account. I mean, it was great, but in a way it was stressful, too."

Macintyre says many find it hard to re-enter the family environment after a prolonged absence. "It can be hard for spouses to relate to each other's world." A military father may go from a tightly disciplined, predominantly male culture to the relative disorder of family life. A traveling salesman might be wining and dining clients one week, the next he's looking at dirty diapers and kids who won't eat dinner.

Kelly Ash, of Sarnia, Ontario, goes through a compressed version of "Here today, gone tomorrow," every week. Her husband, Todd, is a trucker and, though he is seldom away for extended periods, each week he's "six days on the road," as the song goes. Ash and

her two-year-old son, Cody, are on their own most of the time. As the daughter of a single-parent trucker, Ash came to this lifestyle with her eyes wide open and armed with some of the necessary survival skills. "My dad taught me basic plumbing and things like that. I've learned to handle a lot of little things on my own, although I often have a list for Todd for when he gets home," she quips.

Macintyre says that along with self-sufficiency, social support is very important to a parent whose partner is away most of the time. "Sometimes you need to push yourself a little to find out what resources are available and to look for opportunities to make friends"

Julie Gauthier has worked at developing a good support network. "I have friends and neighbours who will take my kids at a moment's notice," she says. But it wasn't always that way. When Parise was two months old and colicky, Leclerc was called to work unexpectedly, "Normally I am home for the winter, but this time there was a two-week trip the company wanted me to do," he says. "I really didn't want to leave Julie and Parise but I was new with the company so I felt I had to go." Shortly thereafter Gauthier "went down the chute," as she puts it. "I was all alone with my baby who seemed to cry 24 hours a day."

Gauthier descended into a period of postpartum depression and anxiety that lasted almost a year. "I think with my first child I was too stubborn about asking for help," she reflects. "I thought I should be able to handle all this on my own."

"I felt like I should have been there," adds Leclerc. "You carry that baggage with you every day. I try to deal with it in a way that doesn't affect my work, but it's there," Worrying about what's going on at home is a big concern for the parent who is away, confirms Macintyre. But couples in this situation face a real dilemma: While good communication is essential, it can be hard to find the right balance between sharing your life and filling up your partner's head with fruitless worry.

Kelly and Todd Ash went through some growing pains in this area. "At first he'd phone and I'd complain – about having nobody to talk to, about not knowing where he was, about whatever problems I was having. Sometimes we'd joke about him being with another women. The conversations were sometimes pretty testy," says Kelly. The two of them eventually had to hash things out. "We realized that neither of us had any idea what the other was going through," she says. While Todd was caught up in meeting schedules, watching the weather and fighting fatigue, Kelly was up to her elbows in home and baby.

"I began to see that he would worry when I'd tell him every little thing, and he'd get frustrated because he couldn't do anything about it," she says. After talking it through, the Ashes decided to be more selective in their conversations. "I stick to the most important things now," she says. For his part, Todd has learned to ask Kelly how things are at home before launching into how bad his day has been.

Lorraine Barner says this kind of delicate balance comes mostly with experience. “I learned to tell my husband on a need-to-know basis,” she says. “I stopped telling him things there was nothing he could do about.” On one occasion there was a glitch with Michael’s paycheques. Lorraine stopped getting them for a while, and ran short of money. “At one point I had an insurance bill to pay and no money, so I got a bank loan. I didn’t tell him. I thought he would just worry.”

Long-distance Mama

These days, it’s not so uncommon for a mom to be away from home for chunks of time on business or at school, as in the case of Audrey Shecter. This Toronto mother of two spent three years attending law school at Queen’s University in Kingston, beginning when her children were one and four. She started out going part-time, which meant she was away only three days a week, but midway through the first year, Shecter increased her course load to full-time. She would leave home very early Monday morning and return before supper on Friday.

Modern technology helped Shecter carry on with some of her mom duties even when she wasn’t physically present. She set up a flat-rate phone line, which gave her everyday contact with her family at a limited cost and allowed people to call her for free. “I talked to Rafi and Orli and our nanny every day,” says Shecter. “I knew what they had for lunch. I spoke to their teachers and doctors. I even arranged playdates. It was really important to me to continue to be an active parent just like I would have if I’d been at home working a full-time job.”

This daily contact also helped with the transition at the end of the week. “When I came home on Friday it was just like coming home from work. The response I got from the children was very much like I get now.” Shecter also points out that when she was home she was home. She didn’t do school work on weekends and she had four months off in the summer. “I had more time at home that I do now,” she says.

Did she take some heat over this? You bet, but not from her husband. “He was behind me 150 percent, but others would make allusions to my nanny being the mother at home,” she recalls. “People would say, ‘How are your children? Aren’t they devastated when you leave?’” Shecter doesn’t think so. She remembers when Rafi was five and going to school, he latched on to the idea that his mom was a student like him. “He’d say, ‘I’m a student and Mommy’s a student.’ Then when my husband brought them down to Kingston for a visit, Rafi wanted to meet my teachers.

“I watched my kids very closely throughout this process,” Shecter says. “If I had seen any sign that this was affecting them negatively, I would have quit.”

This was a pretty big thing not to talk about, and though her husband would have worried, chances are that he could have either spoken to his superiors or told Lorraine who she could contact for help. In fact, Macintyre points out that the Canadian Armed Forces now have family resource centres at each military base where families can access a number of services. Looking back, Barner isn’t sure she’d recommend the same approach to other young moms, but her story exemplifies the need that part-time

single parents feel to stand on their own feet. How do the children fare in all this? Gautier says that Parise usually gets accustomed to her father's absences, but there are times when the little girl just flat out misses him. In those situations, having Parise do something concrete for her father seems to help. "I ask her if she'd like to draw him a picture," Gauthier says. "Then we walk to the mailbox together and she mails the letter herself. This seems to be very important to her. Parise also loves to help me bake, so sometimes we make something for Papa and put it in the freezer for when he comes home."

In many ways what it all boils down to is having two lives – one when dad's there and one when he isn't. "When partings are a part of your life, you need to learn to be happy in both situation," says Lorraine Barner, "I tried to convey to my children that we love Daddy but we don't depend on him for our happiness, that we could be happy when he was here and when he wasn't.

Ed Barner, one of Michael and Lorraine's three grown children, has an interesting perspective on his father's absences: "I missed him, but I never felt like I didn't have a father. I was well aware that it was something he *had* to do. It wasn't like he was doing it to get away from us. That made a difference.