

Growing Concerns
A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson
www.MomEnough.com

Question: My husband just started to commute weekly to an out of state job. We have two small children and I fear the bond with their dad will be hurt. I also worry that having sole childcare responsibility will take its toll on me and on our marriage. His job is a good one, and we could move to be with him, but we aren't sure we want to leave our home, community, schools or families just yet. What can we do to make the impact on our family less substantial?

Answer: This sounds like a challenging situation for your whole family. But it's good you're thinking carefully about how to maintain your children's close relationships with their father. And you're wise to anticipate how to make sure you and your marriage thrive under these new circumstances. Here are a few tips to preserve those important family bonds:

- Have your husband make audio- or video-tapes of himself reading your children's favorite bedtime stories. Then incorporate those tapes into your bedtime routine on the nights your husband is away.
- Encourage your husband to send cards to each of the children when he's away or to leave notes or treats for you to tuck into their lunchbox each day.
- Schedule regular times for phone conversations with your husband, encouraging the kids to tell their dad about the things they're doing so that he remains connected to their daily lives. If the children are old enough to do school work, have them read one of their stories over the phone or even fax their homework to their father's hotel so he can see firsthand what they're doing.
- Set up a special basket for each child to save things they want to show their dad when he comes home on the weekend. This might include pictures they've drawn, a favorite new book, or a photograph you took of them and their friends at the park. This will help your kids anticipate their dad's return and will show their father that they're thinking of him while he's away.
- Be extra careful about the time you do have together. This means keeping weekend work to a minimum and making plenty of time for activities you enjoy together. And it also means allowing time

for you and your husband to be alone. Keeping your marriage strong is a gift to the whole family!

- Reach out to friends and family to keep you company, give you emotional support, and help with the kids. No doubt you have much to offer others, so think about trading favors with members of your support network. For example, you might make a double batch of lasagna and trade dinner for a few hours of weeknight babysitting.
- Take time for special treats for yourself -- a walk with a friend, a long hot bath, or, if the budget permits, a massage or a night at the movies. You will be better able to meet your children's needs if your own needs are met.

Despite these tips, I feel compelled to say that all of these suggestions are poor substitutes for having your family together under one roof. I would urge you to consider carefully your reasons for living apart. Certainly it is good to be close to extended family, friends, and the schools and neighborhood you know and love. But a marriage is the foundation of a family and, in the long run, living apart may seriously undermine your family stability.

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