

FAR LEFT: Lesley Mhlanga was overjoyed to be reunited with his mom and appeared emotionally unscathed. But a day later he started showing signs the abduction ordeal had affected him (LEFT).

recover quickly if you have to leave them behind for longer, provided they're left in the care of a loving person.

Separation anxiety tails off between the age of two and three when children are able to understand if you explain something to them, such as that you're just going shopping and will fetch them from their granny's as soon as you're done.

However if children older than four still have an extreme reaction when you leave them and complain of nightmares, stomach ache, nausea or vomiting there could be a more serious underlying problem.

HOW TO MAKE THE SEPARATION EASIER

Separation from a parent due to divorce or even a business trip can be hard on children.

Although children are mostly attached to their mom they also miss their dad and cry when he goes away. Young children in particular who can't grasp what's happening must be given special attention at the time.

"Children worry about their parents," therapist Liz Dooley says. "They need constant reassurance that everything is fine with their mom or dad."

It's a good idea for parents who go on long business trips to phone or even write letters or e-mails regularly. Send pictures and reassure your children you're still part of

their life even though you're not home for supper every evening.

"If you stay in contact regularly it will be easier for children to let you back into the family structure when you get home."

Arrange with your partner that you'll call at a specific time so all the children are in when the phone rings, Cape Town child psychologist Ria Kotze suggests. Encourage older kids to make a note of the time in their school diaries and let them write down beforehand things they want to say and ask.

Meanwhile, whether you're dealing with separation caused by divorce, travel or family illness it's a good idea to maintain the family routine. Coping mechanisms when a child has been abducted also apply to less traumatic separations.

If the usual routine at home is disrupted try to get things back to normal as soon as possible, says Pauline Moaoa, a social worker at the Soweto Family Life Centre. It makes children's world safer and more predictable and helps them to restore their trust in their carers or to retain it in one parent when the other goes off.

IF YOU'RE AWAY LONGER THAN A WEEK

■ Leave the children with someone they know and like – a grandmother, aunt or close friend – and who is willing to stay in your home. This way the children sleep in their own beds and are in familiar surroundings.

■ Tell your kids days in advance you'll be away. Say things such as, "You're so lucky. Granny will be here next week to put you to bed when I'm away. It's going to be such fun!"

■ Try to say goodbye when your kids aren't hungry, tired or restless.

■ If they have to stay in a place they don't know well let them gradually become acquainted with their surroundings and situation. Visit the house for a few hours so they can get to know the lie of the land. If you leave the children in the care of an au pair ensure they get to know her well before you leave.

■ Because young children don't understand the concept of time use things they know such as their favourite TV programme. Tell them you'll see them again the third time it's been on TV. Or make a wall chart so they can mark off the "sleeps" until your return.



■ It's important you feel the carer will be able to cope when your children cry or become hysterical. It will help if you arrange a time to call her to ensure the child has settled. It takes most children between 15 and 20 minutes to calm down after you've left by which time their attention will have been distracted with toys or friends.

■ If you're admitted to hospital ask the carer to bring your kids to visit you so they can be sure you haven't disappeared.

■ Give them a picture of all of you together so they can look at it when they miss you. Tell them to hold their favourite blanket or cuddly toy when they miss you and to talk to the toy to make them feel better.

■ If you're going far away to another city or country start reading them stories about the place long before you leave. Pinpoint the place on a map. □

SOURCES: WWW.CHILDDVELOPMENTINFO.COM, THE TIMES (SUNDAY TIMES), DIE BURGER, WWW.KIDSHALTH.ORG, WWW.BALTIMOREPSYCH.COM, WWW.PARENTWATCH.COM.

IF YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN ABDUCTED

In the wake of such a distressing event let your child **open up** when he's ready. Ask questions such as, "Were you scared? Were you worried you wouldn't get food? Are you cross with me?"

The secret is to **put yourself in his shoes**, social worker Pauline Moaoa says. "Let him tell you what went through his mind when he was separated from you. Don't discount the answers even if they don't make sense. **Listen to what he says.**"

Unlike adults children are unable to express their feelings clearly. "A child may feel anger towards his mom because it's the only way he can express what he's feeling," says Charl Louw, a psychologist at Men and Women Against Child Abuse.

If he's scared keep him with you. It's advisable for the child to have his primary carer with him for the first few days but not for longer or

else he'll become used to the "benefits" of being a victim, Louw says.

Life goes on which means carrying on with school, homework and exams. But be patient. Give him plenty of physical contact. "Talk to him and hug him," he suggests.

If the traumatised child has brothers and sisters parents must **guard against treating him differently**. This will reinforce the role of victim and upset the other children.

"Children are often braver and **more innovative than you think** and have the ability to find their way through a crisis," Louw says. "Coming to terms with bad things is a normal learning process all children have to go through and not even experts can protect them from this. But if the problem behaviour persists for longer than a month and there's **no sign of improvement** or it becomes worse you must get professional help."