

Loving Long- Distance: Families Separated by Distance

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Many families are geographically separated for some period of time. This time apart can be characterized as a long-distance relationship.

A long-distance relationship can be defined in various ways, and experiences may differ from one person to the next. For some, living long-distance from a loved one becomes a normal routine in life. For others it can be complicated and challenging.

Long-distance relationships can occur over a few days, months, or even years. For some, loving long-distance becomes part of their family structure, and for others it is a new experience.

Some struggles a family faces while together are the same as those faced by a family separated by geographical distance. Other challenges may be unique to the experience of being a geographically separated family.

5 R's of Family Change

In the book *Parenting Alone Together . . . How Does Our Family Change?*, author Mary Dooley Burns identifies five R's of family change during geographical separation. These five R's are roles, rules, relationships, routines, and recreation. If communication and family discussions occur before the separation, adjustments of these five R's can smooth the transition.

Roles: Roles refer to household and family responsibilities. Some questions to ask include: How do the jobs and responsibilities change when one person is away? What roles will be easiest to adapt to and what roles will be more challenging? What roles will not be filled until the family member returns? How do roles change when the distant person returns?

Rules: Rules are defined by what is expected of each family member, including responsibilities, boundaries, and expectations. Some family rules are detailed and clearly stated; some of these rules are implied and are part of family norms. Do the rules stay the same during geographical separation? Will the family add new rules or dismiss rules during geographical separation? Do family rules become more lenient or stricter during times of separation?

Relationships: Relationships refer to the bonds, connections, and responsibilities within a family. During geographical separation, the bonds may be defined differently than during times of togetherness. How will relationships with relatives, friends, or family change? What are the expectations of each family member? Who is responsible for keeping connections strong during times of geographical separation?

Routines: Routines include daily activities that keep the family functioning. With a family member miles away, certain aspects of family routines will need to change. What daily routines will be most affected by geographical separation? What daily routines will be least affected? What adjustments or new routines will complement or replace routines during family togetherness?

The Five R's

Roles

Rules

Relationships

Routines

Recreation

Recreation: Recreation, special events, and celebrations will also be affected when family members are separated by physical distance. Mapping out a plan for these special family events is also important to keep connected with those who are apart. Does the family continue to celebrate events during separation? How will the distant family member be included in celebrations or special events? Are special events postponed until the distant family member returns?

Some of these R's may be more affected than others, but preparation is best. Deciding how to make changes that are helpful to all family members involved can help ease the transition between "together" and "apart."

Tips for Staying Connected

Research at North Dakota State University (2002) identified five distinct areas for maintaining connections during separation. These tips may help families stay connected.

1. Establish regular routines for staying connected: Strong relationships are built on trust and security. People thrive in environments when they have routines and traditions they can depend on.
 - Plan how you will most likely communicate.
 - Set aside a specific day or time to make contact. This can include phone calls, internet chats, emails, text messages, or old-fashioned letters.
2. Take the initiative: Take the first step in contacting a loved one. These things can be very simple.
 - Be the first to make contact.
 - Take pictures of special events the distant family member may have missed.
3. Brainstorm creative activities together: There are many different ways to be "together" even when you are apart. Talking with others in similar situations can give you fresh ideas for maintaining your family relationships.
 - Read the same book or watch the same movie and spend time discussing it. Have the distant family member record stories, songs, or special messages for each family member before leaving.
4. Work on maintaining relationship satisfaction. While distance can be a struggle, each member can feel nurtured and satisfied during times of geographical separation.
 - Listen! Pay attention to what each family member is saying.
 - Make a consistent effort to keep connection routines, even when life gets busy.



5. Take advantage of technology: Family members can feel included if you make a special effort to connect with them using some of the methods now available.

- Daily activities can include: calling, emailing, texting, video-chat, or letter writing.
- Families can make videos to send to distant members. Distant members can make videos of daily life to share with family members back home.

Other ideas can be found at <http://www.fambooks.com>. The site includes suggestions and creative ideas for staying connected for moms, dads, and couples experiencing geographical separation.

Loving Long-Distance

Family distance can be stressful and challenging, but it also provides unique ways for strengthening family ties. Defining what geographical separation means for your family is the first step. Start with the five R's of family separation and change by brainstorming ways in which family roles, rules, relationships, routines, and recreation can be adjusted to make the separation less difficult. Spending time being creative in maintaining family connections may help all family members feel included and valued during this time of transition.

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