

Fly-in/Fly-out Families



*Helpful ideas and tips
for living a
fly-in/fly-out lifestyle*

About this book

This booklet is written for fly-in/fly-out mining employees, their partners and families. In the booklet we refer to fly-in/fly-out as fifo. All of the ideas were suggested by fifo employees and their families.

This booklet aims to:

- help you know and understand what to expect in a fifo lifestyle
- provide some practical strategies and
- list some useful community and company resources that can assist you to maintain strong and healthy family relationships.

There are sections for the “fifo” parent as well as the “at home” parent. These can be identified by the page border labels.

You can start reading anywhere in this booklet, just choose a section that looks interesting to you.



Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the many fifo families who so generously shared their experiences, understandings and wisdom to allow the development of this book.

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Introduction

Welcome to fifo - whether you've been doing it for ten years or ten days you will know that it is a unique lifestyle which will affect you and your family members in different ways.

There is no wrong or right way to do fifo. It depends on your family and what suits you, each family member adapts to the lifestyle in their own way, BUT it is very important to talk to each other about:

- your feelings
- how you are going
- how you feel about the lifestyle
- and if there are things you as a family can do to make it work better for you.

Fifo families say the keys to success are good communication, a positive attitude and a strong support system.



Different families use different strategies to make fifo work well for them.

Keeping in touch

One of the most common issues fifo families talk about is communication and keeping in touch while the fifo parent is away.

How you keep in touch when you are apart depends on what works for your family, and also on the facilities that are available on the minesite. Different mines have different arrangements.

Here is a list of some ways to continue to keep good communication. The following pages suggest more ways to use these.

- Telephones
- Email
- Skype
- Internet
- Letters
- Keeping a useful and up to date contacts list
- Celebrating milestones and family events.



If the site has mobile coverage SMS is a cheap, fast option to say a quick hello. The impact of a quick “Cu2morrow” to a spouse or older child should not be underestimated.



Telephones

Some minesites have mobile phone coverage, while others provide landline phones, either free or user pays. More remote sites might only have satellite phones. Find out what is available on your minesite and together decide the best way to use this for your family.

Some families like to talk to each other every day, so the children can keep their fifo dad or mum up to date with what has been going on in their lives that day. Others might talk every second day or so. There is no wrong or right way, it is what works best for YOUR family.

Discuss it between you and decide on the frequency and times that will work best for all of you. It is important to try to stick to the arrangement. Family members can easily get disappointed and worry unnecessarily if a phone call is late or unexpectedly missed. Texting can be useful for older children and for a short acknowledgment of important events.

Avoid having arguments on the phone. Discuss difficult issues when you are together.

Keeping in touch...

Email

On some minesites employees have access to email - this can be a great, inexpensive way to keep in touch. Photos, information, copies of school reports and projects and messages can be quickly and easily shared.

A word of caution - be careful to re-read your email and make sure it says what you want it to say before you press the send button. Once it has gone it cannot be retrieved and people can easily misunderstand or be upset by a message written and sent in haste. Sometimes it can be good to 'sleep on it'.



Internet

Some FIFO parents have access to the internet while they are on site. This is a good way to keep involved with your children while you are away. Some parenting websites have free games you can play together on-line. You might like to help your children with school projects and homework by doing internet searches for them and sending them the information. Photos can be stored and accessed on free sites so family members can easily share these. The internet can also be used to order gifts to be delivered for special occasions.

Letters

Letters and cards can be a great way to keep in touch, especially for children. They are especially useful for those fifo parents on longer “away” rosters such as two weeks at work, one week home. An added bonus is they give children the opportunity to practise their writing skills.

An unexpected greeting card from the fifo parent can be a nice surprise on a family member’s birthday or other special occasion.

All minesites have postal deliveries. It may take the mail a little longer to reach the more remote sites, so keep this in mind if the mail has to arrive in time for a special occasion such as a birthday. The head office of the company that owns the mine can be contacted for their postal address.

Skype

If the site has internet access skype can be a great way to keep in touch. Skype allows you to see and hear each other. All you need is the skype program which is free to download and a special camera for your computer. These are quite inexpensive to purchase and most modern laptops have them inbuilt.



Keeping in touch...

Emergency contacts

It is important that families know how to contact the away parent should they need to, for example in an emergency.

Contact the employer's head office to obtain a list of contact numbers for the minesite but remember to ask for after hours numbers as well.

Keep these in a safe place, maybe near the phone or attached to the fridge with a fridge magnet.

It is a good idea to make sure children, other family members and friends know where this list is and how to call the numbers.

You could also have the contact details for the airline company the mine uses on your list.



Pages 29, 30 and 31 have a blank list of contact phone numbers for you to fill in.

Roles and responsibilities

A common issue for fifo families is that of people's roles in the family - how each family member fits into relationships with other family members.

There are many tasks that need to be done for a household to run smoothly. These can include daily and weekly chores such as putting out the rubbish bin and cleaning the car, paying the bills or organising tradespeople to come and fix an unexpected household problem. When the fifo parent is away the organisation of these tasks is often left to the at home parent and older children.

Decide together as a family who has responsibility for these different tasks - these may be different when the fifo parent is away and when they are home. Work out what is best for your family.



Have you considered using internet banking?

Keep an easily accessible list of phone numbers for tradespeople - see page 30 for a suggested list.

Roles and responsibilities

Ask each other how the jobs and responsibilities change when you're apart and together. How do these changes impact on the family? For example, are phone bills under both of your names so either person can make changes?



Some families avoid discussing difficult matters, not wanting to “spoil their break” or to “upset them while we're apart”. It is important to discuss important issues while you are together rather than letting unresolved matters drag on and fester.

Discuss important issues after the FIFO parent has had time to unwind and settle back into the family. Sometime during the middle of the break works well for many families. Try to avoid having important discussions just as the FIFO parent leaves to go back to the mine.

Remember to talk about and review roles and responsibilities regularly - as children mature or family members' lives change they might take on different responsibilities in the home.

Keeping close

While all relationships have different pressures on them and go through challenging times, fifo couples experience some unique pressures. There are many ways to strengthen your relationship and keep it happy and healthy.

Some of these include making a special effort to...

- Be loving and affectionate
- Be understanding and patient
- Keep communication open and honest
- Trust and be trustworthy of each other, this can be difficult when you are apart
- Be willing to listen, especially during difficult times
- Show appreciation for the work each other does together and apart
- Think about how you talk to each other
- Acknowledge that it can be hard being apart but don't worry about what people think or say about your fifo lifestyle.



An intimate sms may help keep the spark alive during away times.

It is important to take time for your relationship during the break. It is easy to focus on the practical issues like getting the car serviced rather than taking some special time together.

Other fifo couples have suggested some ways to take time just for the two of you and sustain the intimacy between you. Some of these might work for you.

- Make the most of opportunities to have time together while the children are at school.
- Leave surprise messages for your partner in places where they will find them, such as in a shirt pocket.
- Tell your partner how much you love and miss them.
- Consider leaving your children with trusted friends or family members to have some special time together during your break. You might be able to return the favour for a friend.
- Try to make the most of opportunities to do “spur of the moment” things together.
- Give each other “time out” from having to do routine family chores.
- Give each other surprise little gifts.

Some fifo couples describe the regular comings and goings as adding an extra spark of romance to their relationship, the anticipation of reunion.

The at home parent

It's important not to put your life on hold while your partner is away... continue with your own and the children's routines.

The at home parent sets the tone for the family while the fifo parent is away, if you are managing ok then the whole family will cope better.

- Sometimes humour, being able to see the funny side of a situation, can help in dealing with some of life's day to day stresses.
- Be prepared to handle situations as they arise. Have a well-prepared emergency procedure for the family.
- Fifo can have positive effects for all of the family, and your family can become stronger as you all work together.
- If you feel isolated it can help to know more about what it is like living and working at the mine. Ask your fifo partner to take some photos of their room and work at the mine.

Some employers offer spouses and maybe children the opportunity to visit the mine for a day or overnight to see where the fifo partner lives and works. This can be a great opportunity for you to understand more about life on the mine.

Taking care of yourself

You are responsible for your own well-being so it is important that you take care of your emotional, physical and mental health

The three Es...

Eating well...

It can be tempting when the fifo parent is away to not eat properly. Try not to take short cuts in preparing meals or rely on fast food.

Exercising well...

Take time for yourself. Get some exercise in your day. Sometimes this can be difficult when you have young children and the fifo parent is away. You could take your children with you for a walk, join a fitness club that has a childcare facility or swap with a friend, each taking it in turn to watch the other's children. Not only do you get the physical benefit from exercise but it also helps reduce stress and tension.



Emotionally well...

Parenting on your own can sometimes be stressful and lonely, and leave you feeling very isolated. It's ok to ask for help and it is important to know what support is available for you in your community.

These include:

- Close family and/or friends you can call on
- Other FIFO families you have met who understand the particular issues you have to deal with
- You might be a member of a parent's group or church or other social group that can provide support for you.

There are also some internet based FIFO family discussion lists that provide support and practical solutions for each other. See page 32.

Some families like to remain independent and deal with issues themselves, but others like to have a strong support network around them. There is no wrong or right way, different people cope in different ways.

Work out what works best for you. Think about what will best help you stay healthy.

Emotionally well...

Discuss your feelings with your partner and think about what other options you might have as a family. For example, you might consider moving to a mining town so you can be together more often.

Remember to make some time for yourself to relax and to do things that you enjoy. You might like to read a book, watch a movie, listen to music, go to yoga or catch up with friends. If you have young children you might consider using casual or short term childcare to have some time for yourself.

Remember there is also good professional help available. Most mining companies have an Employee Assistance Scheme (EAP) which gives employees and their families access to experienced counsellors at the companies' expense. This is a confidential service, although the company pays for the bill they do not find out what you went to see the counsellor about.

Your family doctor or the local community nurse can also provide support.

Avoid the overuse of alcohol or drugs to help you through the difficult times.



Preparing to leave

For some families the last day or two of the break can be stressful as the fifo parent prepares physically and mentally to return to site, trying to fit in last minute chores, packing clothes and starting to think about what will be happening on site when they return.

The at home parent often wants this disruption to be over and done with quickly so the household can “return to normal”.

Try to be understanding and considerate of each other’s feelings at this time - talk about how best to manage it for your family and then stick to your decision. Try to treat this time as just another family routine.

Staying in touch and involved

Check what communication options are available on your site and discuss with your partner the best way to use these for your family.

Other FIFO parents have used these suggestions to help them stay in touch while they're away:

- Keep a list of each of your children's activities with you on site so you can ask them appropriate questions when you talk to each other by phone or email.
- Phone or skype activities with children can include reading or telling bedtime stories, discussing sports results, telling a joke, talking about a favourite TV show or the latest movie.
- Know the daily routines of your family members so that you can ring at a time that is good for everyone.
- Phone calls don't have to be long, it's more about the contact.
- Don't forget to listen carefully.
- Texting is a cheap option for a quick hello.
- Arrange to watch a favourite tv show at the same time so you can discuss it together later.
- Keep a daily diary to send to each other.
- Keep a notebook or diary with you on site with important family days listed eg birthdays, anniversaries etc... or share an online calendar (lots of people use Google).

Take photos of your work place and your room on site so your children "know" where you are while you are away. Make an audio tape of you reading a child's bedtime story. This can be played at night while you're away.

Looking after yourself

It is important that while you are on site you take care of your emotional, physical and mental health. You are responsible for your own well-being and there are a number of things you can do to stay healthy.

The three Es...



Eating well...

It can be tempting when you are on site to over-indulge, especially with those less healthy options that may be on offer in the mess. Try to avoid fatty and fried foods and choose more healthy options such as salads, stir fries, vegetables and fruit.

Exercising well...

Working 12 hour shifts can make it difficult to find time to exercise. Some options include using the gym in the camp/village; do some light exercise in your room - sit ups, push ups, stretches; you may be able to walk to or from the mine and the camp/village; convince your workmates to make a social sporting team such as cricket or basketball; grab a few mates and kick a football around after work; if the camp/village has a pool regularly do some laps or form social water polo teams. Not only do you get the benefit from exercise but it also helps reduce stress and tension.

Looking after yourself on site



Emotionally well...

Being away from your family in an isolated environment can sometimes be lonely and stressful. So it is very important to look after yourself and to seek help and support sooner rather than later. It's ok to ask for help and it is important to know what support is available for you on site and back home in your community.

On site you might have:

- trusted work colleagues you can talk to.
- members of the OH&S team such as the site nurse.
- an on site company mentoring scheme.

At home there might be:

- close family and/or friends you can call on.
- other fifo families you have met who understand the particular issues you have to deal with.
- you might be a member of a church or other social group that can provide support for you.

There are also some internet based fifo family discussion lists that provide support and practical solutions for each other. See page 32.

Some people like to remain independent and deal with issues themselves, but others like to have a strong support network around them. There is no wrong or right way, different people cope in different ways. Think about what will best help you stay healthy and happy.

Remember there is also good professional help available. For example, most mining companies have an Employee Assistance Scheme (EAP), or you could use your family doctor (see page 14 for more information).

When you are on site and when you are home try to make time for yourself to relax - read the paper, play some sport, watch a movie, listen to music or catch up with friends.

It can be lonely on site. Some people take the time on site to study after work, others join site based sporting activities or find like minded people to share some time with.



Give each other a pat on the back for having a successful fifo relationship.

Back home

When you return home, fitting back into the family again is different for different people. The fifo parent and the family at home have had different experiences during the time away and they may or may not want to share these with each other. Some people describe this as having separate parts to their lives. After the time apart both partners need to prepare themselves for their reunion.

Many fifo parents take the time in the plane to leave work behind and to get themselves into a family “headspace” so when they arrive home it is easier to slot back into the family routines. They think about the things that have been going on in the family while they were away and what they are going to do on their break. Other people take the plane time to finish thinking about work and leave it until they get home to start focusing on the family.





Often the fifo parent has worked 12 hour days while they are on site or they may have just finished night shift, so they may need time to unwind, catch up on sleep and gradually “settle back” into the family routine. Discuss with your family what works for you.

Children react differently to the regular absences of their parent. When you come home take time to talk to each child individually and respect their way of coping with your comings and goings.

Here are some helpful suggestions for making the most of time together:

- Mark the breaks on a calendar so all family members know when the fifo parent will be home.
- Consider having special family occasions during the break - for example children often don't mind when their birthday is celebrated as long as it is celebrated.
- Plan activities together.
- Be realistic about expectations of what can be achieved during the break.
- It can be a good idea to have important family discussions in the middle of the break.
- As much as possible make the time at home “family time”.

Back home



Comings and goings

Many fifo parents worry about the impact their regular comings and goings will have on their children. Here are some strategies other fifo parent's have found useful.

Make the fifo parent's comings and goings a normal part of the household routine, children adapt better if a fuss is not made. Talk about the fifo parent as "going to work" rather than "leaving". Children take their cues from the reactions of people around them so if they see their parents and other family members coping and accepting the lifestyle as normal then they are more likely to do the same.

Many parents have found that it's best not to count down until mum or dad comes home. Telling them the night before or on the day of homecoming helps them see the comings and goings as normal and nothing out of the ordinary. The same when the fifo parent is leaving - treat it as a normal, ok event.

Some families take the fifo parent to and/or from the airport. However the arrival and departure times of the planes may not fit with the family routine, they are often very early in the morning before children are awake or later in the evening, past children's bed times. Talk about it and work out what will work best for your family routines and finances. Some families use taxis, others car pool and yet others have an older second car which they leave at the airport.



Managing children's behaviour

Maintaining the boundaries

Children do best with consistent boundaries and routines. The regular coming and going of the FIFO parent can sometimes make it difficult maintaining consistency. For example, one parent may not know or stick to the household rules. Children may take advantage of this and play parents off against each other over issues such as bedtime or helping around the house. This can lead to disruption in the household. As a family, work out the rules and boundaries for the family including the praise for good behaviour and the consequences for inappropriate behaviour, and then as parents support each other by sticking to them. Consistent boundaries and routines are healthier for the kids, make it easier for the at home parent when the FIFO parent is away and help minimise the impacts of FIFO on children and the family.



There are good books available with great ideas on parenting and managing children's behaviour.

Missing milestones and family events

Sometimes it is unavoidable that the fifo parent misses a special family event or milestone. In this situation other fifo parents suggest the following:

- Mark the breaks on a calendar so all family members know when the fifo parent will be home and can plan ahead.
- Consider having special family occasions when the fifo person is home, for example children often don't mind when their birthday is celebrated as long as it is celebrated.
- Video or take photographs of the event so the fifo family member to share on the internet or when they come home.
- If the facilities are available consider "streaming or skypeing" the event live on the internet.
- Remember that the time you do have at home provides extra opportunities to share weekday activities with your children, for example you can take your child to playgroup, attend a school assembly or help at the school.



Reality check

Fifo works well for many families but as time goes by circumstances can change and so do family members' needs. It can be useful to check in with family members on a regular basis to see how it's going for them.



- Have things changed?
- Is the fifo lifestyle still working for everyone in the family?
- Or are there some things that need to be changed or adjusted?
- If the at home partner is managing well then the rest of the family will cope better.
- How long do you want to continue fifo?
- Are the benefits worth it?
- Have you considered living in a mining town or regional centre close to the mine so the family can be together on a daily basis?

When considering these issues don't forget to acknowledge the positives which the lifestyle offers. For example, blocks of time for the fifo parent at home with the family.

Common challenges faced by couples

It is important to remember that most couples face difficulties in their relationship from time to time. For fifo couples there can be pressures and challenges that are unique to their situation.

Example 1

Mike has recently started fifo. He calls his wife, Stacey, every evening around 7pm. On his fourth day on the job, while Mike is on site he receives a message at 10am that Stacey has called. The message asks Mike to call her back. Mike feels very stressed. He can't get to a phone until 7pm when he gets back to the village. Mike begins to think that something has gone terribly wrong. He wonders if his children are ok. Most of the day he is preoccupied with worrying thoughts. Finally, at 7pm when he rings Stacey, he finds out that she just wanted to have a chat, to hear his voice because she had missed him. Mike feels very annoyed.



Example 2

Nick's roster is 2 weeks on 1 week off. While he is away, his partner Annmarie, enjoys having their bed to herself. When Nick comes home it takes Annmarie some time to get used to sharing 'her' bed with him. Similarly, Nick finds it hard to adjust to having to clean up after himself and not having someone prepare his meals for him everyday. When he's on site, Nick has everything done for him.

Example 3

Marnie and Geoff have been doing fifo for 10 years now, and are happy with the lifestyle, but sometimes Geoff wishes he didn't have to miss out on so many special family occasions. Marnie still finds it hard to get the kids to give Geoff time to catch up on his sleep when he first comes home. They always want him to do things with them straight away.

You might experience similar issues to those described in the examples above. Remember you are not alone, and that many fifo families experience and successfully overcome similar challenges. It is important to be aware of the particular challenges that you face in your relationship and to talk them through with each other. It may just be about getting used to the changes. It can be a good idea to seek professional help if you find it difficult to resolve any issues yourselves.

Practical things to do

Here are some practical things you can do to make your fifo life easier.

- Put together a list of emergency phone numbers including contact numbers for the minesite (see Pages 29, 30 and 31 for ideas to use).
- Teach your child/ren to use the emergency numbers.
- Put together a list of contacts of trusted tradespeople.
- Consider taking out power of attorney for each other.
- Make a Will.
- Put together a basic first aid kit.
- Do a first aid course.
- Join the RAC.
- Consider having telephone and other such accounts in joint names.
- Keep insurance details handy.
- Know where your important papers are.
- Consider having a financial plan or strategy.



Useful contacts



Fifo parent

Work _____ (WH)

Work _____ (AH)

Room _____

Mobile _____

At home parent

Work _____

Mobile _____

Fifo parent's employer

Minesite

Work _____ (WH)

Work _____ (AH)

Fifo parent's employer

Head office

Work _____ (WH)

Fifo parent's airline company

Work _____ (WH)

Useful contacts



Neighbours

Relatives

Friends

Power Company

Electrician

Plumber

Mechanic

RAC

RAC membership No

Emergency numbers



Police

Fire

Hospital

Local doctor

Ambulance

Poisons information centre

Chemist

Medicare number

Health fund

Resources

There are many useful community resources to help you. Some of these are listed below.

The white pages business and government telephone directory has listings of the contact details of useful community and government agencies. Check your local directory for more information.

Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS)

City Calls	08 9442 5000
Country Calls	1800 198 024

Beyond Blue

National depression support and information www.beyondblue.org.au	1300 22 4636
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Child Support Agency

www.csa.gov.au	13 12 72
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Health Direct

24hr health advice	1800 022 222
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Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au	1800 55 1800
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Lifeline

www.lifelinewa.org.au	1300 789 978
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Mensline Australia

National telephone counseling, information and referral service for men www.menslineaus.org.au	1300 789 978
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Mental Health Direct

24 hr mental health advice	1800 220 400
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Mission Australia Helpline

	1300 886 999
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Parenting Line

City Calls	08 6279 1200
Country Calls	1800 654 432

Relationships Australia

www.relationships.com.au	1300 364 277
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Internet resources

There are also many useful parenting and children websites. Some of these are listed below.



Long distance families

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/lines/fami.html#homeaway>

www.fifoinfo.com.au

www.fifofamilies.com

www.miningfamilies.com

www.miningfm.com.au

Parenting

www.parentlink.act.gov.au

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

www.gegpnetwork.org.au

www.familyassist.gov.au

www.communities.qld.gov.au

www.ngala.com.au

www.nt.gov.au

Child safety

www.kidsafe.com.au

General sites

www.community.gov.au

www.community.nsw.gov.au

www.community.wa.gov.au/

www.cyh.com

www.dhhs.tas.gov.au

Disclaimer

Every care has been taken in preparing this list but it is intended as a guide only. It was accurate at the time of publication and does not necessarily reflect the preferences or opinions of the authors.

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