



When it comes to parenting, I am not a traditional dad. I am not saying that I am particularly good or, for that matter, noticeably bad. That's for the kids to answer when they are grown up. I just don't see my role in a traditional way. I am rather what I like to call a 'Eurostar dad' who, for the past six years, has committed himself to making a fortnightly journey across the Channel and being the link between two sets of fabulous kids.

By *David Willows*

Eurostar Dad — a father away from home

London to Brussels

Sitting back in my seat as the train pulls away from London's Waterloo station, I close my eyes and wonder where the time has gone and whether I did a good enough job. Did I tell them how much I love them? Did I listen to their worries and make sure they were doing okay at school? Did I comb their hair and make them clean their teeth?

I pull out of my pocket a card given to me by my eldest boy. He is nearly 11 years old now.

To the best Dad in the world, reads the envelope. Seeing it again brings tears to

my eyes. If only he knew how much better I might have been.

*To daddy
I love you so much I can't say.
Lodes of love,
Jack xxx*

My beautiful boy.

We had some good times together this weekend. We laughed, went to the park and practised our free kicks, shared news about school, got wet, shouted at one another, ate together, watched Match of the Day together, bought some European Stars Top Trumps, kissed and told each other

that we were loved. It is almost always the same. But, then again, we like our routine and it works for us.

The reason it works is because we manage to cram two weeks-worth of normal life into each 36-hour visit. But make no mistake, it is never easy being a father away from home: walking through busy streets avoiding the rain, encouraging tired legs to keep going just a little while longer, staying over at a friend's house or in a small hotel. Some families have the privilege of 'down time'. We don't. We are living out family life in the fast lane. We do not leave each other alone for a moment. We talk and hug and kiss constantly. We hungrily grasp at every moment in the knowledge that

time is hurtling towards another goodbye. But I guess that this is the deal and, for what it is, this is my commitment.

As the train reaches my final destination, I am still going over the weekend in my mind. I imagine the children curled up in their beds and, as I step off the train, I whisper one last 'goodnight' and head off home.

Brussels to London

What price for a hug? I can tell you the answer. It is a 947km-round trip. Whether by train, plane, or car, I could make the journey with my eyes closed. To some it might appear a ridiculous way of living. But for us, it is what we call 'life' and this is one time I am happy to be considered a fool.

Once, I did end up going to London for literally a single hug, on the weekend our twin babies were born. I recall it as if it were yesterday: the telephone ringing, telling me that I was needed 'back 'home' immediately; tearful explanations to confused chil-



felt as absence for another. I am the 'Eurostar dad' always journeying, always somewhere in-between.

Perhaps that is why the tunnel between France and England is so important for me. In six years, I think I have now passed

New Years Eve is perhaps the most sacred of our family rituals, where the significance lies in the detail. Six children, aged two to ten, and two adults preparing their favourite food (whoever said chicken nuggets don't go with tomatoes and shrimps?), drinking pretend champagne, dressed up in all manner of old clothes and long-forgotten costumes. It is a time of silliness and indulgence in each other's company, with not a care for what time we go to bed, having to say goodbye, or the fact that some of our children don't speak English, whilst others don't speak French. This is an evening that is understood by everyone at a much deeper level. It is a celebration and acknowledgement of the life we have 'together'.

Sitting exhausted on the sofa, I look into the faces of each of my children, lost in the excitement of being with one another. They hardly notice I am there. But in that moment, I find myself more alive than at any other time. These are precious moments, I think to myself, borne out of the complexity of all the journeys, all the hellos and goodbyes. And they won't last forever. So I simply smile to myself and enjoy being a dad – even if I am somewhat untraditional.

“The reason it works is because we manage to cram two weeks-worth of normal life into each 36-hour visit.”

dren; making the long journey back to Brussels, caught on a train between two worlds – feeling somehow absent to both. Never before had I felt so stretched or so confronted by my limitations.

I recall an angry woman at the Eurostar desk telling me how I should have planned my journey better and that I needed to have bought a flexible ticket. With children now on both sides of the Channel, being flexible has become a way of life. With each journey that I make, these days, there is always a 'hello' and 'goodbye' at both ends. My embrace of one child is always

through it over 200 times and every time the feeling is the same. I close my eyes and find myself in a state of letting go of the place I am leaving in order to grasp hold of those I am travelling towards. The tunnel is 20 minutes of time to myself. No phones. No demands. No one but me. This is my time. My ritual.

The collision

Of course, the tunnel is not just a symbol of separation. It is also a means of bringing the whole, rather non-conformist, family together.