

A How-To Guide to Family Time

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Sarah leans toward her husband, her face beat red with frustration and a raised tone in her voice, and says, "You never spend time with the kids! You work from 7am to 7pm, and on the weekends all you want to do is play golf, watch sports, and do stuff for you! And I am ..." Before Sarah can finish her thought, Robert lashes back sarcastically, "You're right; you're always right." After a brief pause, Robert continues, "I am so tired of being criticized for not doing enough with the family. Compared to my dad, I am a saint." Robert remembers his dad leaving his mom when Robert was 9, and he rarely saw his dad when he grew up. His voice cracks; his sadness is evident, and his anger softens. "My dad did not teach me or my brother what it was like to spend time doing family stuff. I wish I had a 'how-to guide' on family time."

Unfortunately, Robert is not alone. It may be the influences of our families of origin (the people who raised us) or our lack of a purposeful plan, but many of us have little direction when it comes to the how and/or what of spending time with the family. To add insult to injury, many family schedules are overloaded with work, school, homework, band and sporting events. The task of getting the family together seems nearly impossible; creating space to spend time together can be challenging.

"Quality" and "Quantity"

Quality vs. quantity has long been a source of debate for psychology professionals and parents alike. In regard to family time, these two terms do not have to be treated separately. One of the first steps in developing a plan for family time is to create space for both quality time and quantity.

Research suggests that kids spend about 40 minutes each week in conversation with their parents and about 12 hours each week watching TV. (Some research shows many teenagers watch up to four hours of TV a day.) Furthermore, kids hear over 1,000 commands a day. "Don't play with your food." "Go clean your room." "Brush your teeth." If a relationship between a parent and child is limited to a few minutes a day in conversation and most of that conversation is filled with parental commands, the chances are high for a big disconnection in their relationship.

Couples and families come to see me with concerns surrounding the relationships and bonding with their kids. In some cases they view their family situation as "unfixable," and they feel hopeless. After considering

the context of the family, their history, and their current issues, I offer them a few challenges. First and foremost, set aside a time to enjoy being together—do something fun. This is intentional scheduled time for the entire family to enjoy being together, time that is both engaging and entertaining. This time is focused on actually “being with” others. Examples include: making eye contact, listening to one another, laughing, and talking. This entails more than simply watching a movie or being in the same room as each person’s attention is somewhere else (i.e., reading books, watching TV, surfing the Internet, or playing video games).

Here are some principles for making this work:

- Be intentional, focused and “real” about the time you spend together.
- Plan a once a week moment to be together (put this time on the family calendar).
- Spending time outdoors
- Going for walks
- Swimming
- Camping
- Riding bikes
- Playing board games
- Bowling
- Eating breakfast and dinner together a minimum of 3 mornings and nights a week
- Make a family calendar.
- Discuss upcoming activities.
- Include each family member in the decision-making.
- Allow them to lead a particular time for that week.
- Build a sense of ownership.
- Be faithful in not allowing conflicts with scheduled family time (i.e. work, friends, church, other activities).

Families can also add another once-a-week time family gathering/meeting that could include elements such as an icebreaker, a Christian or spiritual devotion, family calendar planning for the week, or prayer.

Here’s an example of the shape this gather might take:

- Total time is 45-60 minutes

- Nothing gets in the way (TV and cell phones off), and everyone schedules his or her life around this time.
- Be clear that each person understands and owns the importance of this time and that it takes precedence over other activities or obligations.
- Sunday night 6-7pm
- Icebreaker—Share experiences from week prior. “What experience this week was frustrated you?” “What friend have you connected with this week?” “What is something that has happened to you this week that you are proud of?”
- Christian or Spiritual Devotion—This could be based on a book or Scripture that has meaning to you. The facilitator can share for 3-5 minutes and then have a discussion for a few minutes. The family rotates each week until each person in the family brings a thought, theme, or Scripture and facilitates the time.
- Family Calendar—Talk about what is coming up that week. Everyone brings their schedules, including work, school, homework, sports practice, etc., and maps out the family schedule.
- Prayer—Each person in the family can share about their desire or need for prayer or for prayer for someone else. Persons in the family that are comfortable praying can pray and those who are not comfortable praying can abstain.

These suggestions for quality family time will likely be helpful for you, but contrary to popular belief, building family connection and bonding does not have to simply be about quality of time. It also can be about the quantity of time. These moments in time can be more spontaneous, more fluid and unexpected. Common examples include running errands together and talking about what is going on in each other’s lives, playing catch in the backyard, or joining the kids in something they are already doing such as playing a video game.

Being Present

About 20 percent of my practice is working with adolescents ages 12-18. Once I sift through the frustration they have with their parents, one of their underlying needs is a craving to be noticed, to be wanted, to have their parents take interest in them. In this regard, there is absolutely no substitute for time. One of the primary ways that kids experience love from parents is time invested. Child psychologist Fran Scott states, “Every child needs at least one person who's crazy about him/her.” In other words, every child needs someone who loves them irrationally.

Recently, I officiated a wedding in Houston for my cousin. During the ceremony I spontaneously shared these words: "Nothing tells the other that you want them or desire them more than making the conscious decision to be present with the other." "Being present," by definition, means to make a cognitive and emotional decision to be physically and mentally with another. This not only is true in adult relationships such as marriage, it is also true with kids. Kids have a way of letting you know when you are not present with them. Parents who decide to be present with their children tell them they are wanted or desired! What a compelling reason to spend time together as a family. This begins with each person choosing to be physically, emotionally, and mentally present.

A close friend of mine recently shared a story about his love addiction (non-technically speaking) with his iPhone. Since purchasing the device, he confessed to me with humor and honesty, he tries to steal away small amounts of time each day to download new applications and music and maximize all the features the phone has to offer. Many of us have developed this kind of pathological relationship or affection for our media devices. The same phenomenon applies to kids as well. Conversation between them and their friends has become less verbal and more focused on texting. The text-centered world we have created can often be a hindrance to "being with" people, even when you're in the same room.

The choice to be truly present with our families communicates that which we all need to hear the most—that each of us is loved and desired. With that mind, take advantage of every opportunity to spend time together, both intentional and spontaneous, both quality and quantity.