

Good article for those of us who find ourselves making our children the center of our world. FYI

### ***Helping Hearts Heal***

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#### A Child-Centered Life

What to do when your world revolves around your kids.

By Jill Savage



My six-year-old son, Austin, stood at the door and cried, "Mommy, don't go!" as I placed a small overnight bag in the car. My husband, Mark, had just called me from an out of town trip and asked me to join him for a 24-hour overnight getaway in Chicago before returning home.

I'd struggled making the mental adjustment. Mark had called me on my cell phone while I was waiting in the carpool line at our older son's high school.

"What are you doing?" Mark asked, calling from the Phoenix airport.

"I'm waiting to pick up Evan." I responded.

"Are you feeling spontaneous?"

"Not particularly," I answered, finishing with, "What are you up to?"

"Meet me in Chicago," Mark said. "Drive up there tonight, and let's take some time for just the two of us."

"You're crazy," I told him, frustrated that he'd just put me in the position of making a decision that was sure to disappoint someone. I'd have to leave within two hours to make Mark's plan work, first finding a sitter, getting the kids' school items together for the next morning, and packing a bag for me. It was a two-hour drive to Chicago from our central Illinois home—not exactly something I was looking forward to doing alone.

*Wife first, mother second.* That phrase resonated in my mind as I considered the request Mark had made. I'd first learned it in my early mothering years after reading Elise Arndt's book, [A Mother's Touch](#). While I valued the concept, I struggled with the practical side of making it happen.

*Marriage-centered, not child-centered.* Another phrase Mark and I had learned in a parenting course we took at our church. It was now foundational to how we operated within our family, but so hard to live out!

I reluctantly made the decision to meet Mark in Chicago. It was a choice to do what was right at that moment, and I hoped a feeling of excitement would follow once I got there. After helping the kids with their homework, we ate an early dinner, and I secured our 18-year-old daughter to baby-sit overnight. I quickly packed a bag, kissed everyone goodbye, and headed out the door.

Mark and I have been married 21 years. Eleven of those we'd describe as "happily married." That would be our last 11 years. Our first 10 years were extremely difficult. In year seven we found ourselves in a marriage counselor's office, wondering how we ended up in this mess. We had three children, Mark was finishing college, and I was active in our church and community.

In our journey to get our marriage back on track, we realized our life had been revolving around our children—a huge factor in our marriage mess. It was throwing us off balance. Mark and I had begun to let our children run things at home, including how much time we spent together as a couple. We didn't want to leave the kids because they'd have "separation anxiety." We both feared that something might happen to them if we left them in the care of someone else. We didn't live near family, so childcare was always a problem.

We'd become so child-centered that we didn't have time for each other. And our marriage was deteriorating because of it.

We didn't realize the very thing we desired to give our children—a secure home environment—would happen only when our children knew they lived with a mom and a dad who loved each other. This knowledge would provide the stability for which they longed.

Too many of us become parents and then place our marriage on the back burner. It's impossible to keep the fire ignited without some strategic attention to the fuel that keeps it burning. When we realized our marriage was suffering from a lack of attention because of the demands of rearing a family, we discovered these seven strategies that allowed us to keep our marriage a priority.

Connect daily

A phone call in the middle of the afternoon, an e-mail sent during the day, an "I love you"

note slipped into a briefcase or a purse to be found at a later time—all of these thoughtful efforts declare loudly, "I'm thinking of you!"

Mark and I have found great value in a "mini-date" each evening when he gets home from work. By taking 15 minutes of "Mom and Dad" time, either before or after dinner, we can talk about our day and discuss our agenda for the remainder of the evening. While it took some time for our children to adjust to this change, now they understand the value of this "uninterruptible" time. It's only 15 minutes, but what a difference it makes!

Go out regularly

Unfortunately, most of us think "dating" is something we do only before marriage. However, dating needs to continue after we say "I do." We need to play together, have uninterrupted conversations, and share hopes and dreams. The key to taking time together weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly is to select a regular time, arrange a reliable sitter, and fiercely protect your date. For instance, Mark and

I have our date time on Monday evenings. We have a teenager who sits for us each week, and both of us put a big heart on every Monday night of our personal calendars to make it a priority.

What about other childcare options? You might want to trade sitting with another family. One night you watch their children, and the next week they watch your children. One family

I know trades with another family from 4:00 every Friday afternoon until noon the next day. With that arrangement, each set of parents has a night alone twice a month. The kids enjoy playing together, so they look forward to the weekends too!

Play together

When we celebrated our fifth anniversary, Mark gave me the romantic (using the term loosely!) gift of an engraved bowling ball. Interestingly enough, we'd never bowled in those first five years of marriage. When I asked why he chose that present, he said he thought it would be fun to play together.

Several years later he took up racquetball and asked me to play with him occasionally. I really had no interest, but it was fine with me if he wanted to play with his friends. A few years ago, Mark took up golf. Once again the requests to join him began.

Eventually I picked up Willard Harley's book [His Needs, Her Needs](#) and learned about the concept of recreational companionship. That's when the light bulb went on for me. It wasn't about bowling, racquetball, or golf. Mark was really asking for recreational companionship—he wanted to play together!

What activities did you enjoy doing together when you were dating?

Ball games? Golf? Theater? Riding motorcycles? Whatever you enjoyed before marriage, you can still enjoy after marriage. With children in the picture, it will be more challenging to make it happen—but it's worth every ounce of effort it takes to pull it off.

#### Touch often

What used to be a long, passionate kiss at the door becomes a quick peck on the cheek when children come along. A daily, 30-second kiss can do wonders for helping you stay physically connected to your spouse.

A loving, non-sexual touch when walking by each other in the kitchen speaks volumes. Practice PDA (public displays of affection) at home. While your kids will pretend to be disgusted by it, secretly they love knowing Mom and Dad love each other and show it openly.

#### Vacation for two

Ten years ago, Mark and I were given a trip to Rome, Italy. Believe it or not, I had no desire to go. Bottom line, I did not want to leave my children for 10 days. However, God was teaching me about making my marriage a priority, and he used this trip to drive home his point.

We made that trip—and honestly, Mark and I fell in love again during those 10 days of vacation for just the two of us.

Sometimes moms and dads need to take some time away to play together, explore the world together, or just relax together. While family vacations have their place, an occasional vacation for Mom and Dad can inject new energy into a relationship that needs attention.

#### Step into each other's world

I love musical theater. Mark doesn't. Mark loves coffee. I don't. I'm a night owl and Mark is an early riser. We have different tastes and interests, we process differently, and we function on different time clocks. How do we find common ground? We deliberately step into each other's world.

While Mark doesn't clamor to see the next community theater production, he accompanies me once or twice a year—not because he loves theater, but because he loves me. I've tried to learn to like coffee, but just can't acquire the taste; nevertheless, I'll sit with Mark at his favorite coffee shop and have a cup of tea. When I want to go to bed at midnight and his choice would be 9 p.m., we meet in the middle for a common bedtime around 10 or 10:30.

Compromise and a servant heart are key to navigating differences and stepping into each other's world.

#### Remember—you know what's best

When Austin stood at the door and cried, "Mommy, don't leave!" as I walked toward the

car to meet Mark in Chicago, I recalled a few days earlier when we'd made a visit to the pediatrician for his annual physical. Austin had cried the same cry, but this time the words were, "Mommy, I don't want a shot!" Obviously he didn't understand what was best for him when it came to receiving an immunization that would protect him from a terrible illness. In the same way, he didn't realize what was best for him when his mom and dad needed to take a little bit of time to reconnect.

It's okay to push aside the feelings of guilt. Our children will survive—and they'll be better for it. We have to remember that, deep down, Mom and Dad know what's best, even when the kids' tears or comments yank on our heartstrings.

That spontaneous overnight in Chicago was exactly what Mark and I needed. I'm so glad I said yes to Mark. By the time we returned home 24 hours later, we'd reconnected as a couple. The kids survived just fine without us, too. Our teenage son gave us a little perspective on the day we returned when he said, "I know it's good for parents to take a break from the kids. You know, though, sometimes kids need a break from parents, too!"

Columnist John Rosemond once wrote, "Some parents act as if they took a wedding vow that says, 'I take thee to be my husband/wife, until children do us part.'" If you are operating as if you took that vow, commit today to prioritize your marriage in the midst of rearing your family. It's the best parenting gift you can give your children.

Jill Savage, author of three books including [Is There Really Sex After Kids?](#) (Zondervan), is executive director of Hearts at Home (<http://www.hearts-at-home.org/>). Check out Jill's website at <http://www.jillsavage.org/>

Making it happen without robbing a bank  
By Jill Savage

Looking for a way to make your marriage a priority in the midst of rearing your family?  
Consider these strategies:

Childcare Options:

- Hire a teenager to commit to one night a week as your babysitter. This keeps your dates regularly scheduled and allows your children to become accustomed to a regular sitter.
- If grandparents, aunts, or uncles live in town, ask them to consider having a special night with the kids every week or every other week.
- Trade sitting with another family. One night you watch their children and the next week they watch yours.

Inexpensive Dates:

- Share a meal when you eat out. (Make sure to tip the waiter the estimated cost of two meals because he's serving two people.)
- Check out the local ice cream shop and order a root beer float complete with two straws!
- Explore the zoo or a museum.
- Take ballroom dancing classes at the local Parks and Recreation Center.
- Go out for pie.

#### "No Cost" Dates

- Take a walk in the park, holding hands and talking.
- Spread a blanket on the ground and enjoy the night sky.
- Take a bike ride.
- Go to a bookstore and find books to look at and dream together.
- Revisit the location of your first date and reminisce.
- Put the kids to bed and watch your wedding video or look at your wedding photos.
- Take a drive in the country and talk about your dream home.
- Slow dance in your bedroom or living room.
- Have a quiet evening at home, make a meal, light some candles, and rent a movie.

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