

Carving out couple time: Five simple tips

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I am a mother of three and have been married for six years. My husband and I have had a wonderful relationship, but things are going downhill. We never have time to be together. I'm always answering my husband with, "I can't, I'm with the kids." He is frustrated too. I love my children dearly, but I am at my wit's end.

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Mothering three children means that you and your husband are outnumbered. Yet, it is in the best interests of your children that Mom and Dad take some quality time for their relationship. Since you have identified the problem, why not start there? Securing time together on a daily basis now may save you the expense of later marital counseling or an unrealistic, last ditch push for a "weekend away" to save your marriage.

1. Connect. Talk with your partner about realigning your relationship. Carve out time for your couples' relationship on a daily and weekly basis. You are each other's nourishment. Your energy is derived in part from the heart and soul of your marriage. The love, attention and appreciation you give one another is what helps you through the day. By about age four your children can learn to respect 30 minutes of "parent time" each evening after dinner. And while children are younger, you and your husband can create this time after their bedtime. Children's bedtime needs to occur in a timely fashion that also allows for this quiet sharing and "down time" together. Use it to catch up on your day. Also, consider a family meeting once a week. Maintaining a boundary around your couples' time models intimacy for your children. Your marriage is the foundation on which their lives are built. Like watering a garden, spending quality time together assures your children's sense of security and continued growth.

2. Organize. The larger the family, the more important it is to develop productive routines so that you do not waste energy reinventing the wheel each day. Divide duties between yourself and your husband so that lunches get made, teeth get brushed and homework is supervised. Initially, effective scheduling takes effort, but planning will pay off in time saved and lower frustration levels.

3. Delegate. The secret of enjoying larger families (though it is beneficial for smaller ones as well) is to delegate. As your children reach appropriate ages, it is possible to obtain their "help" in a cooperative fashion which both

increases their sense of worth and helps you out. Develop a strategy for handling daily chores in a routine manner with children pitching in to help. Washing dishes, putting toys away at a specific time of day and encouraging children to play "on their own" for 20 minutes while you and Dad have "talking time" can become their "jobs" in the family. Age-appropriate duties encourage children to become responsible adults, and some form of "helping" can start as early as two years of age. Delegation can make running a family smoother and more enjoyable.

4. Be consistent. Children flourish in a stable, structured environment, which is also balanced with family fun and predictable activities that serve to bond families together. If kids are rewarded with enjoyable family time together, chores can represent a sense of belonging. Self-confidence develops for the child when routine duties are balanced with predictable family outings, whether it be Friday night pizza at the local family bistro or Sunday afternoon walks to the park. Create ways to balance spontaneity with consistency and order.

5. Seek balance. Balance your schedule so that you can enjoy family and couples relating. For example, you could create a weekly schedule that alternates couples' time one week with a family outing the next week. Once predictable times for enjoying family relationships are established in this manner, you can always look forward to the next time you have carved out together. In this way, the relationship serves as a buffer to the many stresses of daily living.

The early years of raising children are particularly time intensive and physically demanding. Now is the time to make order out of chaos. The couples' time you create may feel like an oasis in a desert in the early years, but with consistent reinforcement you will find yourself in more lush surroundings as your family matures. *