

Finding More Quality Time for Your Family

As you head into the back-to-school days, you may wonder: Can I really do it again? Pack lunches at dawn, dash from carpools to business meetings, apply mascara at stoplights, help with homework, race to piano-lesson pickups -- only to return home, rush everyone off to bed, and then wake up to a go-go weekend of hockey practice, soccer games, and birthday parties?

A growing number of concerned parents are thinking seriously about the enormous costs of frenetic living. Determined to put the focus on family, a group of moms and dads in Minnesota has organized a community group, Family Life First. Its mission: To get families in their community to rethink their hyperactive lifestyles. Try the group's ten hints on finding more quality family time.

#1: Limit kids' activities.

Limit your kids to one after-school activity. Period. This may be harder decision for you than for your kids! You want Johnny to continue with piano; he wants to make the hockey team. How to choose? Think of it this way: Teaching kids to make choices is an essential part of a parent's job. These activities build skills, and give kids a sense of what they can do. But time spent with family gives them a sense of who they are. Try this approach: "You have to give up something (piano or hockey) to get something (peace of mind or time to breathe)."

#2: Limit yourself.

As a parent, you also have your limits. Basically, you get one evening out during the week. Period. Mom has a book club or a yoga class. Dad plays squash. Simply put, you can't "be there" for kids when you're not around. The rituals that build closeness -- bedtime stories, cuddles in front of the fire or a favorite TV show -- can't happen when Mom and Dad use the front door like a revolving door. P.S.: This doesn't preclude a "date night" for Mom and Dad! Keep the Love Train on track by scheduling a quiet evening for two now and then.

#3: Kill the TV.

Or at least dismember it. Turn off your TV during meals, and the result will probably be better table talk and a less circus-like atmosphere. Sitting down to watch a particular show or video can be a great way for families to relax together, but having the tube on in the background just adds another level of noise and stress. Or consider this: No TV Monday through Thursday nights. More time for homework, reading, talking, playing.

#4: Have candlelight dinners.

When Bugs Peterschmidt's husband started coming home later and later each night, the couple had a chat about "Disappearing Daddy," MIA at the dinner table all too often. They agreed on a 6:15 p.m. standing mealtime, and Dad went in extra early each morning to make it work. Prompted by a Greek friend who said, "You Americans don't know how to dine," the couple decided to light candles each night for its "calming effect." No discipline issues are discussed and no phones get answered during dinner. Bugs reports that her family of four are enjoying their food and one another more, now that dinner is "an oasis in time."

#4: Brunch!

Make brunch for your bunch every Sunday. Family Life First's Gina Coburn liked the idea of having one mandatory family meal each week, but it wasn't until she and her husband went off on their own one Sunday that she discovered what their weekly

brunch meant to her teenaged children. "They called on my cell phone and said, 'What about our family breakfast?'" Gina says. "And I realized that they would never have missed it if we hadn't gotten so intentional about it."

#6: Make a reading tree.

This is a great idea from Steve and Ruth Bennett, parents and co-authors of numerous activity books (including *365 TV-Free Activities You Can Do with Your Child*). Find a tree in your backyard or local park and claim it as your own. Bring a book and a blanket, and make it a regular spot for story time. It's a great way to savor fall foliage or the warm breeze of an Indian summer night.

#7: Cook double.

Cook double, and save time and trouble. Bugs Peterschmidt of Family Life First doubles every recipe and freezes half for another night. This makes half of her mealtimes a snap. "Last night, we had tamale pie. I made two of them. Add salad-in-a-bag and dinner's done!"

#8: Pick your own.

Go apple picking with your family (or pick any fruit or veggie, for that matter)! If you've got kids of different ages and temperaments, it's sometimes hard to find a movie or game for everyone. Picking apples or pulling carrots is something everybody can do well and do together, and these outdoor activities provide another chance to savor the waning warmth of the fall season.

#9: Catch some winks.

Get some sleep! Lights out by 10 p.m., 11 p.m. at the latest. When you feel rested, you feel calm. So pay bills in the morning, and turn on the radio to catch the news you missed from the night before.

#10: Plan TGIF fun nights.

Friday night, heralding the end of the work week, is one of the best times to focus on family. While others wait in line for tables at overcrowded restaurants, grab a takeout pizza and head back to the ranch. Let kids take turns each week setting the agenda: Video? Monopoly? Scavenger hunt for loose change? It's a time to remember that our home is not just our castle. In the 21st century, home and family are our fortress, our best protection from the onslaught of the 24/7 world.