

Intentional Parenting

by Janet Henry (Jr. High Teacher)

In a recent survey, middle school students were asked, “What would you consider quality time with your parents?” The responses were surprisingly simple:

- I would like to have family game nights.
- I would simply like my dad to ask me how my day was and care about the answer.
- It would be quality time to me if my mom didn’t answer the phone while we were spending time together.
- I wish we still ate dinner together as a family. That was usually quality time.
- Rather than just driving to sports activities (which I appreciate), it would mean more to me if they played catch with me, shot hoops with me, or took me to the batting cages and practiced with me.
- I would like my parents to pray with me other than at the meal times.
- I think we should go to the park more or take a hike now and then – spontaneously, not planned.
- Quality time would be my dad wrestling with me.
- Sometimes I like to just spend time with Mom or Dad without siblings. I don’t care if we go the grocery store or the movies; it would just be nice to have them to myself sometimes.
- It would be fun to build something together or try something new.
- I would like to have an evening with no computer, no phones, no TV, and then think together about how to spend the evening. Maybe we would just talk.
- Anything we do together that is not scheduled is usually quality time for me.

For children to get any sense that they are loved and valued, you have to be prepared to spend some time with them. I am sure I am not telling you something you do not know. However, the term “spending time with your child” gets tossed around casually. Almost without exception, the students interviewed in the survey did not include school events, soccer tournaments, or watching TV on their list of quality time. Our children want and need our undivided attention more than we can imagine. It is the parents who give children their sense of belonging and security. Children can so crave this that they may resort to behave in whatever way necessary to receive it.

In an article I recently read entitled “How to Spend Quality Time With Your Child,” the author discussed the need to fill our children’s “emotional cup” with intentional quality time and demonstrations of love and acceptance.

“ When you send a child out into the world, especially a girl, who doesn't have her little cup full, what do they do? They become "at risk" for problems in relationships. And a lot of times they get in problem relationships because they're saying things like, "I just want to be loved. I just wanted someone to love. I just wanted to belong. The whole issue of self-esteem relates to exactly this job of being intentional parents - filling up your child's cup.”

So in our busy, activity- driven lives, how do we really make the most of our time with our kids. Below are a few basic tips to ensuring that your child's emotional cup is being filled:

- EVERYDAY spend uninterrupted time with your child. For a toddler this can be reading a story just before bedtime. For older children, it can be a fifteen minute game of UNO or taking a short break from homework to shoot hoops together. A teenager often just wants a listening ear.
- Turn off the interruptions so that your child has your full attention. There is nothing worse than an excited (or hurt) child coming to share their heart with you only to be interrupted by a phone call.
- Be sincere. Children know when you are not paying attention. It's also important to not make promises you cannot keep. If you have to schedule your quality time (which is not what kids prefer), make it your first priority.
- Spend time in their world. Sit with your first grader and color. Play a video game with your fifth grader. Take your jr. high daughter on a shopping trip out of town. Take your high school son to a Sacramento King's basketball game.
- Each child in the family needs to have special time with each parent (or both parents together). This was almost unanimously stated in the survey of middle school students. It doesn't have to be a vast amount of time, or every day. Sibling rivalry, when you think about it, is simply competition for the parents' attention. Individual "special" time given to each child can lead to a lot less fighting among them and a closer bond with you and your children.

I would like to add a personal note to this article. Over the many years of teaching, one common complaint I hear from kids is that their PARENTS are too busy. Your children truly appreciate and admire all you do, but they long for some semblance of rest and simplicity. Even if your child distances himself from you when you are home together, there is comfort and security in knowing that you are available. All children are very much in tune with the stress created by busyness. Allowing yourself to be overscheduled robs you and your family of peace and joy. Home truly needs to be a refuge for your children (and you) and a place for them to be refueled to face the challenges of their world. This month, why not treat your children and yourselves to some simple family fun. Turn off the TV, enjoy a meal at the table, play some games, or go out and enjoy the beautiful fall weather together.