

HOW TO SLOW DOWN & SIMPLY ENJOY YOUR CHILDREN

by Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A.

"Stop and smell the roses." How many times have you heard this expression or maybe even said it to your child? Unfortunately, very few of us actually put this saying into practice, especially with regards to our children. Many Monday mornings start with "hurry up, let's go... we're going to be late... stop playing." As an adult, I am sure you experience stress from your hurried lifestyle. Imagine how this is magnified for your children.

Recent studies suggest that our increasingly fast-paced world may contribute to an increase in childhood anxiety disorders, attachment disorders, behavior difficulties, and even attention problems. **So what can we as parents do?** Start by looking in the mirror and asking yourself if there are ways you can slow down. Simply adjusting your daily schedule by reducing the number of items on your to-do list will make a significant difference in your entire family's lifestyle. Remember: You are the model your children will emulate. If you are over-scheduled and frustrated by every little glitch in your day, your children will feel the stress, too.

Start in the evening by prioritizing your upcoming day's activities. Be realistic about what you can get done tomorrow and what can truly wait until the next day. Prepare yourself for the possibility of traffic, an added meeting, or a sick child. How will you cope when or if a hitch occurs? We have all heard about **stress management techniques**, but how many of us really have any or actually use them? Now is the time to start. Let your children see you practicing deep breathing exercises in that traffic jam; ask them to do it with you (in through the nose and out through the mouth).

Exercise with your children. This is a great de-stressor and a wonderful way to connect with your kids. Take a walk, a hike, roller-skate, ride bikes, walk the dog, and most important, talk to each other. **Have a meal together,** light a candle, say a blessing, establish little traditions that are just for your family. These simple changes add predictability and a sense of connectedness, two main ingredients in a good family upbringing.

We all work very hard each day in an effort to provide our children with those things we may not have had growing up. Unfortunately, if it is just "stuff" we are offering, it is likely they will grow up with a similar void. All kids love "things" like toys, video games, bikes, but ask them what their favorite toy was last year and they probably don't remember or even still possess it. Now ask them what their favorite memory from last year is, and I'll bet they tell you about something they did or experienced. Spend time with them doing what they like.

Each child needs time with you. The first item on your daily to-do list should be some quantity of quality time. This doesn't have to be more than 20 to 30 minutes (depending on their age). However, the time needs to be child-focused. Ask them what they want to do and do it. Get down on the floor or

out in the backyard; it doesn't matter what you do as long as you are doing it together. Children look for feedback, so smile, laugh a little, and have fun! These are the "things" that they will remember and probably ask for again.

If you have a child who is experiencing signs of stress-behavior difficulties, fears, anger, or separation anxiety, work with them on relaxation strategies. **Children need to understand that it is okay to take a time-out** (a break from activities/interactions) and they need a place to go when they are stressed out. They may need help relaxing, so read to them, breathe with them, give them a warm bubble bath (add some lavender oil or chamomile), encourage them to draw or sing and dance. These are simple cost-free things that make a difference.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not address **the need to unplug.** This isn't just for the kids—mom and dad, you need to do so as well. Turn off those cell phones for an hour or two. Don't answer the phone at mealtimes, and certainly don't answer it during the time you are spending with your child. As for the kids, unplug them a few times a week. You need to place limits on video game time and use of the TV/DVD and computer. The studies are mounting, and plug-ins clearly contribute to childhood obesity, sleep deprivation, inattentive behaviors, and exposure to inappropriate content.

So to recap, our goal is to stop and smell the roses each day with our children. To do so we need to:

- Set aside 20 to 30 minutes per day per child for child-directed, one-on-one activity.
- Establish some family rituals, including sitting and eating at least one meal a day with our children.
- Enjoy unscheduled, unplugged "together time" one evening or morning per week.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with some tools that can be used in a variety of households and situations. I encourage you to adapt what you have learned to meet your needs and the needs of your individual family. If you have any questions about this topic, or have a suggestion for another article, please contact:

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