

tools of the trade
family improvement



How To Maintain — a — Relationship with your Partner while Raising Children

by Heidi Kiebler-Brogan, M.A.

Have you "lost that lovin' feeling?" Well, you are certainly not alone. Recent studies suggest that up to 40% of all couples with school-age children report feeling disconnected from their partner at some point in time. This is the number two reason couples enter counseling (second only to infidelity issues). And it is certainly understandable, considering our hectic schedules, multiple commitments, and increasing time spent at work.

There are usually two sides to this complaint—often one of the partners expresses feeling as though he or she is "neglected" (having unmet needs), while the other partner reports having "no energy by the end of the day for anyone," including him or herself. Regardless of which side of this equation you most identify with, the bottom line is you and your partner are both stressed, overwhelmed, and unable to meet each other's needs in a way that you once could. We must improve upon these issues!

Some suggestions: First and foremost, you must re-establish some line of communication. This can be achieved in a number of ways: face-to-face, by phone, by letters, or by E-mail. The only way that is not effective, or healthy, is by proxy—do not use your children to communicate or give messages (positive or negative) to your partner. It is rather ironic that in our day of high-tech gadgets, it is actually harder to maintain good lines of communication with those we love, but it is. Decide which mode will work best for you and get started! Set aside 10 minutes each day to check in with your partner, let him or her know how you are feeling, what you need, what you wish for. Do not use this time to discuss the kids, upcoming commitments, or past grievances.

Next, it is time to get organized and start scheduling your time wisely. You must make time for you as a couple. Unfortunately, in all your efforts to be perfect parents, superior employees, and pretty good friends, you have probably overlooked your partnership. It cannot maintain itself so you must nurture it. Begin by scheduling 15 minutes per day/evening for face-to-face time. During this time you will talk with each other, not to each other. Again, leave the kids out of this, if possible, and talk about how you can reconnect, an upcoming date you might schedule, a vacation, a new song you heard on the radio—anything except kids and work! Make these conversations a regular thing. Ideally you would look at one another and talk daily, but try to at least one to two times per week. Your relationship deserves it!

Finally, you have to make time for just the two of you. Yes, I mean a date. This doesn't have to take days or even many hours. It does, however, require some children-free time. I understand how hard that can be so let's start with the babysitter. If you do not have a babysitter, start interviewing, talking to friends and family, or place an ad at the high school, local college, your church,

or day care centers. Think outside the box. Perhaps you can't get a sitter, but there is that hour of karate class on Saturday. Use it! Whatever you have to do, it is vital to your relationship that you get alone time with your partner. Many couples worry that they "just don't have time" or that "we both work all week and it would be unfair to leave the kids on the weekends." I agree, if we were talking every weekend, but I am simply suggesting that you do this at least once per month. Certainly once per week would be great, but I live in the same world as you and understand the difficulties. Dinner, coffee, a walk, time at the beach, golf, bowling—you decide what works for you—and do it! I would not, however, recommend dates like the movies or a show simply because there is no opportunity to interact and make contact.

Now what about the kids? Well here's the thing—your children will greatly benefit from your reconnection and making time for you as a couple. Children of all ages learn by example and you as their parents are the primary example they'll model themselves after. If you are demonstrating what it takes to have a healthy, equitable relationship, then you are doing your children a favor. Children need and want to know that their parents are happy together. Younger children may resist the separation, but reassure yourself and each other that this too is healthy. Children need to learn that they can trust other caregivers. They need to know that you believe they are capable of separation and independence. Individuation is an important developmental milestone.

So to recap, we can improve our relationship by implementing a few simple changes:

- 10 to 15 minutes per day: Check in, touch base, no info sharing
- 1 hour per week: Face-to-face time, dinner, coffee, walk, sit, and talk
- 2 hours per month: Date time without children, in or out of the house

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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