

Recharging the Family Connection

Welcome the lazy days of summer and rediscover the power of family

Story // Angela Ambrose

Summer break is finally here, filling our days with warm, gentle breezes and sun-kissed skies. We'll sleep in late and splash around in the pool; and barbecue and take long, leisurely bike rides. With summertime comes a slower pace, giving kids and parents a much needed break from the pressures of after-school activities, sports and piles of homework that weigh on them throughout the frenzied school year.

But this much-needed break is more beneficial than you may think. The very act of "stopping to smell the roses" can play a significant role in not only reconnecting with yourself, but also with your family and children.

EMBARK ON A FAMILY ADVENTURE

Summertime is the perfect time of year for parents and kids to relax and reconnect. Taking vacations gets people out of their rut, provides a change of scenery and physically removes them from work and home commitments. According to a study published in the 2009 "Annals of Tourism Research" journal, family vacations create a "shared experience" that builds memories and enduring connections among parents and kids.

Active vacations involving new challenges tend to foster a stronger feeling of togetherness and a sense of adventure. For older school-age kids, hiking up a mountain, snorkeling in the ocean or ziplining through a forest creates a greater connection among family members than simply lying on the beach all day. Bonding can take place even before leaving home by involving every member of the family in the vacation planning.

SHARE EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

While luxurious far-away vacations can be fun and exciting, parents don't have to spend money or travel long distances to connect with their children. Simple, everyday activities offer countless opportunities to spend quality time together, from reading a book or taking a walk together to playing board games or cards. Snuggling on the couch and watching a suspenseful movie together can also create a stronger family bond.

"There is nothing you can do to restore your relationship more than just creating a time and a space that's a nag-free zone and where you take almost an instant vacation with

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your child," says Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg, adolescent medicine specialist at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and author of "Letting Go with Love and Confidence: Raising Responsible, Resilient, Self-Sufficient Teens in the 21st Century."

"And those instant vacations don't have to be trips," he continues. "They literally can just be a space where you just enjoy each other, where you just play with your child and listen to your child."

JOIN KIDS IN UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

The primary way kids communicate is through play, which offers the ideal opportunity for family bonding. For most parents, playing with their kids is usually at the bottom of the priority list, right after grocery shopping, preparing dinner, doing laundry and running a long list of errands. The simple act of playing with them contributes to their mental, social and emotional well-being, says Ginsburg, who authored the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) report on the importance of play.

"Play is the way kids build their natural resilience. You try on different hats—you're a monster, you're a superhero—and you learn how to navigate your world," says Ginsburg, who emphasizes the importance of allowing kids to direct the play, not the adults. "Play is central to childhood and essential to healthy development."

STRENGTHEN THE BODY AND MIND THROUGH EXERCISE

Combining playtime and physical activities helps promote total mind-body health. Parents will not only strengthen their relationship, but also their entire family's cardiovascular system, muscles and bones, and coordination. Everyday activities such as jumping rope, dancing, shooting hoops or playing tag can help burn off stress, prevent obesity and make everyone sleep better at night.

With the down economy, staycations—staying at home, but taking day trips to local attractions—has gained popularity. Families can visit water parks or museums, go horseback riding or ice-skating, or scale rock walls without having to leave town.

FOOD BRINGS FAMILIES TOGETHER

One of the most powerful yet simple ways of connecting with kids is by sitting down at the family dinner table together. A 2011 study from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) shows that teens who have fewer than three meals a week with their family are more likely to smoke, drink or use marijuana, and are nearly four times more likely to say they plan to try drugs in the future, compared to those teens who have five to seven family meals each week.

"Meals and food among all cultures is so important. You're not just nourishing your body; you have an opportunity to nourish your mind, your spirit and share things from the day," says Felicia Stoler, DCN, registered dietitian and exercise physiologist in Holmdel, N.J. To encourage more bonding, Stoler advises parents to avoid disciplining kids at the dinner table or discussing emotionally charged topics.

Reaping the benefits of family meals is not limited to dinnertime. Breakfast and lunch count, too, and so does eating at a restaurant or picnicking at a park. If parents' work schedules make family meals difficult, finding other quality time to connect can be just as effective.

TAKE TECHNOLOGY HOLIDAYS

One of the obstacles to spending more family time together is the incessant use of cellphones, TVs, computers and video consoles. According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study, kids ages 8 to 18 spend an average of more than seven and a half hours per day on electronic entertainment, not including time spent texting and talking on their cellphone.

"The biggest distraction in our world these days is anything electronic," says Robert Puff, Ph.D.,

clinical psychologist in Newport Beach, Calif., and author of "Raising Healthy Children and Teenagers."

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as Facebook. A 2008 Samsung Mobile survey reported that more than half of teens who text their parents believe it has strengthened their relationship. And about half of parents say it has opened up communication channels with their kids.

INVOLVED PARENTING BUILDS ENDURING CONNECTIONS

When parents take time off to relax and recharge, kids learn that taking care of themselves is important. Puff says modeling plays a critical role in raising healthy kids: If parents work through weekends and vacations and are constantly stressed out and on their cellphones, kids are likely to follow their example.

"It's not what we tell them to do," says Puff. "It's what we do."

Spending quality time together is like glue that creates a lasting bond between parents and kids. In the last decade, a number of studies have shown that kids who regularly spend time with their parents do better in school, have fewer behavioral problems, experience less emotional distress and are less likely to engage in violent behavior.

"The essence of connection is that kids feel listened to; they feel like they matter; they feel like the adult genuinely adores them. And you don't have to wait for summer vacation to have those moments. They can happen during dinner; they can happen on a walk in a park; they can happen in a car drive," says Ginsburg. "When you're talking about building resilience in kids, meaning making it so that kids can overcome challenges and thrive, there is absolutely nothing more important than a loving, reliable connection with parents." [M](#)

"The classic thing you'll see is a family at a restaurant, and both kids and both parents are not engaging at all because they're all on their phones or their electronic equipment. You've got to put those away and spend time with each other."

Both Puff and Ginsburg agree that families should take technology holidays and power down electronics during special family times such as dinnertime, weekend outings and vacations.

"Technology is really addictive," says Ginsburg. "Every beep feels like a popularity contest."

CONNECT WITH KIDS ELECTRONICALLY

While parents should limit electronic screen time, they must also recognize that the digital world is here to stay. Teens' preferred method of communication is through text-messaging and online social networking sites such