

SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH OUR CHILDREN: HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE WORKING PARENT

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We live in an age where many of us are working parents. Our challenge is to juggle our family responsibilities with our highly demanding jobs at office. Many parents share of their stress and frustration at not being able to spend enough time with their children.

Mrs. Wong, a mother of two sons, and a senior marketing executive at a multinational company in KL expressed the guilt that sometimes working parents feel; “Because of the economic realities, I have to work but there are many days I feel doubt about whether this is the right decision. My older son is struggling a bit at school and I feel I’m not doing my job as a parent.”

Encik Ahmad, a father of 3 and a senior manager at an audit company, shares similar sentiments; “My work just does not allow me the time I want with my children. At peak times, I come home at about 10pm. It makes it very difficult to build my children’s character, because I just am not around.”

Like these working parents, I certainly feel torn at times between the seemingly competing demands of two worlds. Yet in this article I want to offer hope and promise to all working parents. The message is: it can be done.

While the reality is that we have less time to spend with our children, let’s remember that quality is more important than quantity. Even if you had 24 hours to spend with them, the time counts for nothing unless the quality of our engagement with them is real.

The following are some practical tips on how we can maximize the time we have with our children as working parents.

1. **Be mentally present with your child**

Sometimes we can be physically at home, but mentally, our minds are miles away, thinking about some problem we are having at the office. Children have an uncanny ability to sense whether we are really paying attention or not. There are numerous occasions when my daughter, sensing that my mind was drifting, calls on me to “pay attention, papa!”

One reason why we are so distracted is sometimes we bring home our stress from the outside world, so much so that when we’re with our children, we’re grumpy and angry and very much on edge. Obviously this is not the right frame of mind to be in when we’re trying to spend quality time with our children.

There are various things we can do after work to de-stress so that we’re in the right frame of mind. For example, many working adults exercise after work. Some go to the gym. Some just take a brisk walk or go for a jog. Others enjoy a drink (usually a teh tarik!) with their work mates. For those stuck for long periods in a traffic jams, rather than allow being stuck in the car to be the cause of even more stress, we could do things in the car that help us relax, for example, listening to music, or talking to a friend through our hand-phones (using a hands free kit of course!). I know friends who, once they arrive home, take a long hot, relaxing, bath before they do anything else.

Whatever it takes, it is good to clear our minds and hearts of our work stresses, before we spend time with our kids. This way, we will find ourselves more patient, more cheerful, more giving and certainly more attentive to our children.

2. **Do ONE educational activity with your child each day**

Many working parents feel guilty for not being able to contribute to the educational development of our children. The reality of course is that once they begin kindergarten/pre-school, a large part of the responsibility for educating our children will fall on schools and their teachers. That doesn't mean that we play no role.

I have stressed in earlier articles that working parents can and should monitor our children's school work, ensuring that they are enjoying and engaging in the school curriculum. Helping with their homework and more importantly helping them apply some of the basic skills they have learnt to their home life are among the things we can do as working parents to encourage and support what they're learning in school.

However, I've always believed that education is not limited to schooling. There are many learning activities we can do with our children that will help them acquire knowledge about the world and critical thinking and language skills.

For example, to teach a child the science of trees and plants, you could spend 30 minutes in the garden helping them plant some seeds, and over time watching them grow. To teach them to apply the principles of maths, you could open a "pretend" shop at home, give your child some coins, and get them to be the shopkeeper, which will involve applying additions and subtractions to ensure the customers get the correct change. To teach them how to analyze spatial relations between objects and projective thinking, you could play a simple board game with them, whether chess, or checkers, or othello (reversi). And nothing beats just reading them bedtime stories, and having conversations about these stories, to strengthen their language prowess.

These activities don't take a long time, perhaps 20-30 minutes each and the goal should be to do one activity a day.

3. **Do ONE Fun activity with your child each day**

Fun and joy are an important part of our family lives. They help establish the emotional connection between parents and their children. Therefore, it is good to just do things are both parents and children can enjoy together. They say a family that plays together stays together.

Ask yourself, what are things both you and your child enjoy doing together?

Sport is an excellent example of this. Puan Noran enjoys a short game of badminton with her 8 year old son in their garden every afternoon. "We both enjoy playing and its good exercise for me as well." Mr Chong plays football with his son and daughter. Mrs Rama jogs to the nearby playground with her two daughters every evening.

There are also indoor fun activities that parents can engage in. Mr Lee, an architect by

profession and an avid artist, spends evenings drawing and painting with his 7 year old daughter. Michael and Janice do jigsaw puzzles with their children. Encik Azmi has music jamming sessions with his 9 year old daughter who enjoys playing the piano.

For the more adventurous, excursions like a fishing trip, a hike in the jungle, rock climbing might be more appealing.

Conclusion

For working parents, time with our children is so precious. Therefore, we need to be careful with the time we have with them. The point is that we should not underestimate how much we can achieve in the limited time we have. Remember, it's not the quantity, but the quality that counts the most.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010