

FINDING BALANCE: BRIDGING THE WORK/FAMILY DIVIDE

The following articles were written by Dr. Malcolm Smith, Family Education and Policy Specialist for UNH Cooperative Extension, and appear monthly in the New Hampshire Business Review.

Rethinking “Quality Time”

For years I often felt forced to feel guilty by parenting pundits who constantly reminded me that I needed to make “quality time” with my family. Invariably, after a week of exhausting travel for work or hours slaving over a hot computer, I’d try to plan the ultimate weekend for our family.

My vision of quality time included river rafting, breakfasts and dinners at fancy restaurants, trips to theme parks, zoos, vacationlands and various other expensive, guilt-relieving activities. Unfortunately, few of these plans ever resulted in anything resembling quality time.

Often my wife and I would launch into a debate (the polite word) about the costs of these extravaganzas. Or one of the kids would sabotage the plans. Or, more than likely, we would become so focused on trying to have “quality family time” that it was forced, pretentious and not very fun.

Recently my 19 year old, a university student in another state, came for a visit and, once again, I tried to cram as much “quality time” into his visit as possible. I’d planned to experience everything from lobster fishing to kayaking to mountain climbing during his family visit. However, when I proudly presented him the complicated itinerary, he shut me down with a, “Thanks, dad, but all I really want to do is just chill with you and mom.”

It turns out that “just chilling” and “quality time” are closely related. Researchers Tamar Kemer-Sadlik and Amy Paugh at UCLA’s Center on the Everyday Lives of Families took a hard look at the concept of quality time in families and found that while most parents perceive quality time as planned and structured family time, the most valuable communication and experience for child development may occur spontaneously in everyday routines, when you’re “just chilling.”

To my son, quality time meant the night he chose to go through old boxes of toys stored in the attic and look at old family photo albums. When we heard chuckles coming from the attic, we joined him to see what was up. It wasn’t planned and it wasn’t expensive,



but we laughed, shed a few tears and celebrated our lives together as the memories and stories flowed while we looked at the old memorabilia.

Could I have planned this type of “quality time” with my son? I doubt it.

Families probably have always struggled to find time together. As early as the beginning of the 1800s, American families worried about not having enough family time. The phrase “quality time” seems to have arisen during a wave of academic research in the 1970s and 1980s, when two-parent incomes became the norm in American life.

According to the UCLA researchers, while parents perceive quality time as big productions with the whole family, children tell researchers that quality time happens during everyday routines, when parents are available to them and allowing them autonomy. The research suggests that what we really ought to focus on are quality moments, when we’re just hanging out, chilling together.

In this view, quality moments are those small snippets of time when you communicate values, ideals, love, support and concern for your family members. They happen as you go over the schedule for the day and tell your kids you love them, or when you laugh at an old picture of yourself trying to teach the kids how to dive off the high dive, when it’s obvious you’re scared to death.

In general, with a little nudging and attention quality moments can happen almost anytime. The UCLA researchers suggest finding quality moments:

During breaks in a busy schedule: Remember those hugs and votes of confidence your folks gave you when you headed out the door to school? Just checking in with each family member, asking them on the way out the door what they have going can create a quality moment. They can happen individually as well as when the whole family leaves together.

During Household Chores: Hanging laundry together, walking the dogs, even cleaning the fridge can afford time to play, sing, talk or even discuss deep issues. Boys especially, according to some research, find it easier to communicate if they are engaged in a simple activity.

While Waiting: Quality moments can happen in the car wash, waiting for sister to get out of ballet classes, waiting in line for the bathroom. Sometimes the most meaningful bits of life happen in the moments in between the big events.

So from now on, when I have the opportunity, I’m going to put a lot more energy into “just chilling” with my family rather than trying to create the perfect family experience. By the way, my son told me that time in the attic was the best time we’ve spent together in a long time, even though we never made it to the mountains or even aboard a boat.

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