

Kids Need Parents' Presence More Than Presents

by Jim Slempp

During the holidays, parents often think about what they should give their children. Remember there are some gifts money cannot buy. The most priceless gift is your time. Plan time for family outings, a trip to a museum, a walk in a park, a local sporting event, but leave free time for your kids, too.

Children also love to spend time with you alone. If you have several children, try to spend at least one hour a week alone with each. A standing appointment with each of your children can become a great boost to the quality time you need. You keep appointments with everyone else, why not your kids? Take turns with your child in determining the meeting place and the activity or topic of conversation. The best conversations happen when your child is ready to talk, not when you are.

Here are some topics of high interest to middle schoolers: family matters (money, job pressures, parental conflicts, vacations), controversial issues (sex, drugs, love, war, homosexuality abortion), emotional issues (feelings of deep love and affection) the future (college, career), current events, personal interests (hobbies, sports, friends), parents (stories from parents' childhood, confessions of weaknesses).

With a little effort, dinnertime can be the high point of the day. Ideas:

1. **Establish conversational guides.** Don't interrupt, look at the person talking while you listen, no put-downs.
2. **Choose a topic of interest to everyone.** For instance, news, events of the day, or problems in friends' lives can lead to important discussions of values and justice.
3. **Trading questions.** Few kids will talk regularly with someone who isn't also a good listener, so make habits of these good listening techniques:
 - Listen with your whole body. Lean forward and keep eye contact.
 - Don't interrupt constantly with questions and comments.
 - Set a time to listen if you can't right then.
 - Acknowledge feelings. Bounce them back to the person with emphatic statements that show you understand: "Sounds like you're pretty angry with John about something."

In years to come, children will forget most of the things you bought them, but they'll never forget the gifts you gave of yourself. As Jesse Jackson says, "Children need your presence more than your presents."

Over winter vacation, when you have more time to spend with your children, is a good time to analyze what you're doing for family fun. Write down what you have done in the past month and then ask yourself these questions:

- Are you pleased with the amount of time spent in family fun?
- Did all family members enjoy most of the family time or was everything primarily enjoyed by the adults, by the children, by one child?
- Are you pleased with the variety expressed in your family fun times?

- Are your family fun times creative?

Then follow these steps:

1. Consider each family member based on his or her age and list what each one would do for fun. Then ask each member what he or she would do and compare lists.
2. List the family recreational areas in your community. Don't forget state or county parks, which are ideal places for weekend camping.
3. Consider your family fun equipment. Based on your other lists, should you invest a little in good equipment and games? These might be some good holiday gift-giving ideas. Make some definite plans and set aside the time to carry them out. Don't allow anything to get in the way of your planned fun together.

With the winter holidays coming up soon, many students and parents will be involved in one way or another with private parties. Here are some pointers to help with party situations.

1. Insist on meeting your child's friends. When an adolescent gets into trouble, usually the parents have had little or no contact with their child's peer group. Assume it means trouble if:

- You know friend's names, but have never seen or met them.
- Your child always insists on going to meet friends somewhere else.
- Your teen and his friends never spend time at your home.

2. Make it a point to meet all of your teen's friends personally and have them spend at least some time together at your place. It's one of the best preventive measures possible.
3. As a parent of a party-goer, feel free to contact the host parent, verify the occasions, check on adult supervision, be sure there will be no alcohol or drugs, express concern if the party does not meet the above standards.
4. As a host parent, encourage small parties of eight to 10, ask those with drugs or alcohol to leave and notify their parents, allow no one who leaves to return, be a visible host or hostess.
5. Unoccupied homes are frequent party sites. Please alert your neighbors for house supervision while you are away.

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