

Parents Need to Make Time to Spend Together

by Laura Rains

Let's just say whenever Stan mentioned the word “date” to his wife, Terri, she acted less than enthusiastic. They both wanted to spend time alone in a romantic setting, but the last time they tried, it was a disaster. The date was doomed before it even began.

The trouble started when they were unable to find childcare. At the last minute, they found a sitter who had not watched their children before. They were tense and couldn't really relax at dinner.

Their conversation kept circling back to the kids and somehow heated up to a fight over discipline. When their meals were served, the angry words stopped and an ugly silence ensued. They couldn't escape each other. Terri calculated the cost of their “time alone” and concluded it was too expensive.

That dinner date was months ago. The only other times they had really dated were before they married and became a stepfamily with “his” (Tom, 8) and “hers” (Andrew, 10, and Tina, 6) and “ours” (1-year old Melissa).

These days, just the thought of getting away was overwhelming. There was Andrew's carpool for T-ball, Tina's swim lessons, Tom's time with his mom and, of course, finding good childcare. It seemed hopeless.

Yet, going out on a date is one way to strengthen a couple's relationship. The adage that you must take care of yourself in order to take care of others applies. Nurturing the couple relationship helps the parenting relationship. Recent statistics show that over half of first marriages end in separation or divorce. Of those who divorce, 75 percent remarry. The startling news is that up to three-quarters of those second marriages end in divorce or separation. Why?

Stepfamilies have more stress to manage, more problems to solve, more time commitments and less support from others. The family systems are more complicated (just think of adding ex-laws to in-laws and out-laws).

Even the way a stepfamily forms is quite different. Unlike first marriages, where partners have time to develop and strengthen the couple relationship, second marriages bring children into the picture right away. It is not uncommon for couples to have only a few weeks (even days!) to get to know each other before introducing their children. Then their outings become group activities.

Couples with a strong commitment to nurturing the relationship are more likely to stay together, and Stan and Terri were committed. But they had lost the ability to play, and play was one of the things that drew them together in the first place. The stress of raising a family seemed to interfere. This is a common stepfamily experience.

Stan longed for the Terri he fell in love with and he wanted romance. Terri wanted romance, too, but it seemed impossible. Stan knew he could rekindle the flame if he started right. But whenever he brought it up, the conversation quickly escalated into an argument.

Afraid his suggestion would be met with resistance, Stan started small. After the kids were in bed one night, he told Terri he missed spending time with her. She reminded him of the weekend in Portland last month, the picnic in the park on Sunday and the afternoon at Wistec last week. All of those outings had included the children, so Stan was more specific.

“I miss spending time alone with you.” This, of course, reminded Terri of The Disaster Date and the hair on the back of her neck promptly began to rise.

Stan continued. “Remember how much fun we used to have?” He reminisced about the time early in their relationship when they floated down a section of the Willamette and he tried to stand in shallow water and couldn’t get the inner tube off his backside. Terri remembered laughing so hard she got a stomachache, and she laughed again as Stan retold the story.

They started with ideas that were realistic. Sure, they’d love to get away to the coast for a romantic weekend, but if they did, they’d probably have to eat dinner. And that was definitely out of the question!

They jotted down a list of possible dates: going to the movies, taking a drive, going for a walk in the neighborhood, renting a tandem bike for a ride by the river, and meeting for lunch.

Quick tips to plan a date:

- Start small
- Stay future-oriented (don’t bring up the past)
- All ideas are good ideas
- Use humor
- Take notes
- Write an agreement
- Try it out
- Revise as necessary

Using humor to stimulate the creative juices, Stan and Terri came up with a long list of possible solutions:

- They could forget the whole idea and stay home until the kids are 18.
- They could trade childcare with another couple.
- They could walk for an hour.
- They could bring the kids along but have them walk quietly on the other side of the street.
- They could go to a movie.
- They could hire a nanny.

The list went on. The couple decided to go to a movie, but they couldn’t arrange childcare. Instead they chose to take a walk. One idea they included in a written agreement was to avoid talking about the children during their walk.

A few weeks later, Terri and Stan said they had increased their walks to twice a week. At first they tried walking for one hour, but that was too long. So they revised their plan and found that by walking for a half-hour they were more refreshed and they were able to trade childcare with next-door neighbors. Their next goal would be to find better child-care arrangements so they could go on a movie date. Dinner would be optional.

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