



Everything But Time

Why Time Is The Most Important Gift You Can Give Your Child

If there is one gift your child needs most, it's your time.

Finding space in the day to accomplish everything on the to-do list can be a tall order for most parents. Making room in your life to truly give your children your time and attention is the greatest gift you can give them.

Parents are accustomed to hard work, but giving your child "quality time" is arguably the hardest work of all. Quality time is a labor of love that requires patience and persistence, especially when children have learned to survive without it.

The absence of this kind of time spent listening and responding can have a severe effect as children reach adolescence. As part of my work for Three Springs, Inc., a local treatment program that helps teens learn essential life skills and rebuild important family relationships, I meet many young people who are struggling. In many cases, they are facing serious problems and consequences such as depression, substance abuse, school expulsion and even criminal charges. All of them are hurting deep inside, and often they don't understand how to change their circumstances for the better.

What is the most common problem these kids share? Nearly all of them lack a strong relationship with their parents. Family communication is often minimal or even nonexistent. Many of the parents haven't made themselves available to spend time with their kids, or they haven't understood the importance of involving themselves actively in the daily lives of their children.

One boy I know found his allowance of \$100 waiting for him on the family's breakfast table once a week, with his parents already off to work for the day. They worked such long hours that he rarely saw them in the evenings either, when he chose to come home. Another received a computer instead of even a semblance of a relationship with his parents and immersed himself in games and the Internet for hours on end. These extreme examples are representative of how easily parents can overlook the importance of building strong family relationships.

Many of the teens I meet come from what you and I would call "good homes": They live in nice houses and have plenty of material possessions, but they haven't received the emotional support they need. While the parents were laboring to meet their family's other essential needs, they neglected to help their children develop the life skills they need to embrace the challenges of adolescence and adulthood.

Quality time is a popular buzzword thrown around often as a solution for parenting predicaments, but what does it really mean? Quality time is investing yourself in your child's life and listening—really listening—to what he or she has to share with you. It

means giving your child an invitation to share intimately in your life and responding to what they offer in return.

That's definitely a challenge, but you can invest quality time in your kids any time you're in their company. Quality time can be asking questions beyond "How was school today?" that explore what your child is discovering in the classroom and elsewhere. It can be playing a game, tackling a household chore together or sharing a meal. Simply put, it's being present in what your child is learning and experiencing rather than just being there—wherever that may be—in your child's day. In most instances, it's about making the most of the time you already spend with your kids.

Why do kids need quality time? Everyone needs to feel heard and understood, and children and teenagers long for this kind of attention as they begin to establish their own identities and their independence. Parental relationships are also the primary way that kids learn how to relate to the rest of the world, and quality time teaches them to treat others with respect and love. If teens can't find the guidance and support they need at home, they will turn to other sources instead of foundational family relationships.

Building strong relationships requires a consistent investment of time, and parents have to make quality time a priority early and often. Even in adolescence, it isn't too late for parents to begin dedicating time to spend with their kids, but it's tougher to start as children get older. Parents must insist on regular family time while accepting that children may be reluctant to make room for it.

How much quality time is enough? Parents can provide quality time in small increments as their schedules permit, but it's crucial to be involved consistently. Even half an hour of daily quality time can make a lifetime of difference.

Many parents mistakenly think that their kids must have the best of everything. Regular family time is far more important, no matter what your children may tell you, than trips to Disney World or a new computer. Those things are nice fringe benefits for a child, but knowing and being known by Mom and Dad is far more valuable. Take the time today to give your time—and yourself—to your child.

Kerry Appleton has devoted her career to the healing and restoration of children and their families. For more information about Three Springs, please call (888) 758-4356.