

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My husband and I both have high-powered, demanding jobs with long hours and work that we bring home. We have a thirteen year-old son and a fifteen year-old daughter who are involved in school, sports, music lessons, cheerleading, soccer (you name it) as well as spending time with their friends. They're good kids but because of everyone's schedules, we rarely even have time for a meal together. Do you have any suggestions to get our family back together?

-- Shannon O.

Dear Shannon,

Your question will no doubt resonate with many readers, because family togetherness is at an all-time low.

In almost every society, the evening meal has been considered an important part of family life. And yet, in the United States, the number of families who regularly have dinner together has fallen by a third over the last twenty years. According to one national survey only 34% of American families regularly dine together.

Begin by calling a family meeting and ask everyone to bring his or her schedule. Express your feelings about how little time you spend together and clearly state that you want this to change.

Ask everyone to come up with ideas about how he/she can arrange his/her schedule so that there's family time. It is important to let everyone offer ideas about what kinds of activities they'd like to share.

If it were my busy family, I'd find *at least* one night a week when everyone will eat dinner together. Family dinners have a profoundly positive effect on children – especially teenagers.

Teenagers who have dinner with their parents five times a week are far more likely to avoid smoking, drinking, violence, suicide, and drugs according to a May 2000 report from the Council of Economic Advisers.

Remember, these family dinners don't have to be four-course, homemade meals like those enjoyed by the Cleaver family on "Leave it to Beaver" (as I recall, June didn't have a high-powered job so she probably had more time to make a nice roast every day).

With your busy schedules, think about salad in a bag with chicken on the grill. Order a pizza, or take-out Chinese food.

What's important is to spend time together as a family. And that means really being present – in heart and soul – not just physically. Let voice mail pick up phone calls. Put down the newspaper. Turn off the TV (a 2000 study by the Kaiser Foundation showed that two-thirds of all the families that do eat dinner together have the TV blaring throughout. Bad idea!)

Don't allow your thoughts to drift to all the after-hours work you still have to do. Let it wait until tomorrow. Talk to each other. Learn about each other. Ask questions. Listen.

Now, you're on a roll! Go places and do things together. Find hobbies that you can all enjoy together... tennis anyone? You've got a perfect foursome. Make music together or organize old photos into an album – imagine the rich and interesting conversations that could start!

How about a regular “family fun night” during which you make popcorn, rent a movie (rotate around as to who picks it), then talk about it? You can all read the same book – maybe one that your kids are reading for school -- then have a discussion.

Board games may seem old-fashioned but -- after being slammed by my cousin's children in Monopoly more times than I care to admit -- I can tell you that games are great ways to foster interaction, and get to know each other better while having fun.

You'll be amazed by what you can learn -- far beyond how to finance hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place -- about each other, and about the family.

Shannon, the most important thing is for everyone to make this family time a singularly important priority. With that commitment in your hearts, I've no doubt you will come up with many ways to enjoy this quality time, each other, and becoming closer as a family.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.