

Hang around time

Today's families are multitasking more than ever. Increasingly, time-crunched families are made up of dual-earner couples and single parents, cell phones and computers insure that working parents are always "on call," and kids' extra-curricular activities seem to be becoming more and more elaborate all the time. Who gets left behind in all this? Often, it's the people this intricate family structure is meant to support — the children.

And children have pressured lives too. In interviews conducted by the Family and Work Institute, young people are asked, "If you were making a movie or a TV show to describe what life is like for you today, what would it show?"

"Stress!" is the answer heard more and more.

As one explained, "Each person only sees one part of me. My teachers, who are pushing me to do well on tests, see me in school; my coach, who wants me to win the game, sees me on the playing field; and my parents, who want me to get my homework done, see me at home. No one knows what it is like to put it all together. Sometimes, I think my life is more stressful than my parents' lives."

What is the result? In "Ask the Children," a study of 1,023 kids, I found that 44.5 percent of kids feel that their time with their mother is rushed, and 37 percent of children feel their time with their father is rushed. Furthermore, the feeling that time with their parents is rushed affects how kids see their parents. For instance, of children ages 8 through 18 who rate their time with their mothers as "very calm," 86 percent give their mothers very positive marks for "making me feel important and loved," compared with 63 percent who rate their time with their mothers as "very rushed."

So what is a busy parent to do? Here are some suggestions.

If you have had a stressful day, make an effort to calm down. One mother I know listens to music she loves on her way home from work. Just being conscious of trying to calm down can help. Another mother says, "Take a look at your values. Is having relaxed time with your kids a top priority? If so, be intentional about leaving your other concerns behind when you are with them."

Hang out with your children. In this busy world, it is important to have time when you are just hanging out — whether it is a Saturday morning when you all stay in your pajamas or the time before bed when you sit on their beds and talk. Think about the words kids use today: "chill." Or "hang out." Another parent said, "When parents and kids are together, the average parent wants to do something, while the average kid says, 'We're together. That's good enough for me.'" During hang-around time, you each may be doing your own thing, but be ready to shift your full attention to your child at any time. Says one mother, "My daughter probably won't tell me about a conflict at school when I take her out to lunch and ask her questions — she'll want to talk about it when I'm about to sit down and do my bills. So I try to be ready to switch gears when the moment strikes."

Join their world. You can be with your kids and it can be a disaster or it can be great. What makes the difference? If you ask kids, they will say, "being listened to." Connect to your kids through their interests. All children have things they are interested in — whether it is T-ball, skateboarding, or hip-hop music. Find out more about their interests, ask them about them, and encourage them. Once I asked a group of young people what made the difference between kids who got in trouble and kids who didn't. They said that the children who had a strong interest in something were the ones who stayed out of trouble growing up.

Spend some time really focusing on your children when you are together. The "Ask the Children" study found that 62 percent of children say that their mothers find it very easy to focus on them when they are together and 52 percent say the same thing about their fathers. When children feel that their parents are focusing on them, they feel much more positive about how they are being parented. And, when adults are asked what makes them feel successful as parents, again and again, they use the word "focus." As parents describe focus — "It is being in the present tense, not always figuring out the next step" "It's not being distracted... It is really paying attention." As one child put it, "Mom, you are always running around. Can't you just sit down with me for one minute?"