

Top 10 Things You Can Do to Reconnect With Your Family

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One of the greatest concerns of cities today is dealing with problems brought about by at-risk youth. Youth today are at risk from a variety of things, including drug and alcohol abuse, adolescent pregnancy, poverty, physical and/or emotional abuse, gang and criminal activity, violence and vandalism, truancy, and the failure to complete high school. Each of these problems has serious ramifications for local officials like ourselves, who are trying to maintain communities with a high quality of life.

Families need to come together as cohesive units. Cities spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to solve problems arising when kids are put at risk. Unfortunately, one of the obvious solutions is the most difficult to implement: Strengthen the bonds among family members. Children with strong connections to their families are generally able to avoid risk factors and lead healthy, productive lives.

There are many things that working parents can do to reconnect with their families or to maintain their sense of family.

1. Create a family-friendly workplace. Don't sit back and hope that someone else will engender a family-friendly environment. Jump on the bandwagon with your coworkers, and show that placing the family first is critical to both the women and the men of

today. Exhibit the overall benefits to your employer in terms of productivity, reductions in absenteeism, and higher morale.

Look at implementing programs that other communities have used successfully, such as job sharing, telecommuting, and the compressed workweek. Although these three programs may not be possible for all parents, they can try to eliminate their overtime hours when possible and spend that valuable time with their families. Allow employees to take time off to attend games, school plays, and recitals. Implement family events like the traditional corporate picnic. Allow pretaxed dollars for daycare initiatives, and look for benefit programs that show a commitment to high-quality prenatal care.

Form effective partnerships to offer summer programs for early teens and care for sick children. Encourage parents to take time to get involved in community outreach activities. Coaching a soccer team, becoming a girl scout leader, or joining the PTA are critical efforts toward community partnership and collaboration and are essential to the future success of local government. Your participation in these programs not only enhances your family life; it also helps build a sense of community that now is lacking throughout the nation.

2. Learn to work cooperatively with other parents to help them, and let them help you. In this way, everyone wins. Figure out what you need, and ask for help. Be willing to help other parents in need.

These days, a woman tries simultaneously to live up to the conflicting, socially prescribed demands of being a good woman: nurturing her family, picking up the children, staying home, cooking food from scratch, fulfilling herself, conducting an interesting and successful career, maintaining a 50/50 relationship with her husband, doing volunteer work. A man tries to live up to the ideals: equal partner, sensitive

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listener, expresser of tender feelings, and hands-on father.

As we try to create perfect children and perfect experiences in a society that is seriously deficient in adequate supports for families and children, something has to give. Too often, it is our physical and emotional health! There are no perfect parents. Do the best you can, and don't lay guilt on yourself because you can't do it all.

Think cooperatively. Take a day off of work and school, and go to an amusement park. Reward your children with a weekend trip. There is no substitute for structural social supports. No matter how early working parents get up, how well they manage their time, or how clearly they set their priorities, they cannot make up for a lack of social supports. There is no magic formula for parenting; remember that you are only human and cannot do everything; nor can you do it all perfectly.

3. Do the best you can do but no more. Mellow out. Celebrate your minor accomplishments: putting all of the laundry away; recycling outgrown clothes; balancing the checkbook; getting to work. There are no small accomplishments when you are balancing work and family.

4. Set up daily rituals. Sitting down to dinner together or ensuring that you are there to say good night are small things that do make a difference. If you are traveling, preschedule a time to call home. Go for morning walks.

5. If you have more than one child, take time to go one on one with each. Each child needs to know that there is a unique relationship with you and that you value him or her as an individual.

6. Live close to work. The advantages of following this advice will startle you. You will gain the opportunity to eat lunch with your kids, to attend short but meaningful appointments, to spend less time commuting, and to take naps (my personal favorite). If it is impossible for you to work close to home, make your commute a family event by enrolling your children in daycare facilities close to work and using the commuting time to talk with them.

7. Hold family meetings. Don't deal with issues only during the heat of a battle. Kids love family meetings, especially with rotating chairs.

8. Take advantage of the good times. Your family shares many of the negative aspects of your job. Let them share in the pluses, too. If you are going to a conference, take the kids along. Make a weekly date with your children or spouse. If you are a single parent, make weekly dates with your children—protected times that all family members can count on. *Consistency and stability* are the key ingredients of a good relationship!

9. Connect with your children at school, and become a true partner in their education. Children spend the majority of their day at school. In reality, you otherwise have only


a few precious hours in which to connect with them, in the mornings and in the evenings. Find ways to be with them during school hours. Volunteer in class. Become involved in the PTA.

On occasion, take them out for a surprise lunch. Do homework with them. Talk to your children about their lives. Find out about them. Ask them the names of their best friends, their favorite colors and favorite songs, and you will open the doors to more substantive conversations.

10. Focus on those tasks that are truly important. If you are one who is struggling with additional hours at the office versus getting home to your family and friends, look at what you are working on, and ask yourself: Will my work on this task have an impact one, five, or 10 years from now? If the answer is no, you need to refocus. Think about it. You may be spending time on some-

thing that has no significant value to the future, rather than spending quality time with your family.

When all is said and done, would you rather have messed up at work or messed up your family? (This is not to say that work is not important but that kids are more important than your job.) Aspiring to balance work and family life does not mean you are not committed to your career.

Begin your new relationship with your family today. Turn off the television, and put down the mail. Take some time to ask your children what they would like to do with you if you had 15 minutes, an hour, or a day just for them. You may be surprised at what you hear, and if you follow through, you will be rewarded. Building a strong family connection is key in avoiding the risk factors that plague today's youth. 

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