



goodadvice

STAYING CENTERED, COPING, LIVING FULLY

“Honey,
the kids
ate our
marriage”

Why the child-centered life is hard on a couple—
and not so great for the kids **By Ellen Seidman**

54%
Number of
parents who
said in an online
poll that their
kids often sleep
with them

It's 8 A.M., and I'm caught up in the get-the-kids-to-school shuffle: shoes, breakfast, knapsacks, and no, you can't bring the vacuum cleaner for show-and-tell. Suddenly, I catch my husband giving me a funny look. “What?” I say, wondering if I have toothpaste on my cheek. “Do you know what today is?” Dave says with a wistful smile.

Um. Wait. Oops. Today is our ninth wedding anniversary. I knew it was coming up, but kid stuff had taken over my brain—signing up for swimming lessons, planning my daughter's

5th birthday party (must get blue-frosted cupcakes!), finding a speech therapist for my 7-year-old son. I'd been so consumed with them, I'd forgotten about us.

Like other couples we know, we've fallen into a pattern: Our kids have become our life. Dave and I go out to dinner and spend a good chunk of it talking about them. We center our weekends around their activities. And—dare I admit it?—they often sleep in our bed.

My husband and I are still very much in love. He's the greatest guy I know. Yet I miss →

him. I really miss him. So I set out to find ways of reconnecting—short of asking Octomom to adopt the kids.

I wasn't surprised to learn that this kid-focused life isn't healthy for our marriage—and it turns out that it's not so good for the kids, either. "These days, many parents seem to be married to their children instead of their spouses," says David Code, an Episcopal minister, family coach, and author of *To Raise Happy Kids, Put Your Marriage First*. "This creates stressed-out parents who feel disconnected from each other and demanding, entitled

“Make the most out of being together—create bubbles of intimacy throughout the day”

kids who act out. Some might become overly dependent on parents as a result of all the attention.”

Researchers who study family behavior agree that a strong bond between parents is the heart of a happy family. As sex therapist Laura Berman, Ph.D., puts it in her couples' guide, *The Book of Love*, “No matter how sacrilegious it sounds...you need to put your relationship before your children. A strong relationship provides security for your children and demonstrates how a loving, respectful partnership should be. What could be more important?”

Nothing, of course. But it's easy to forget when you live in Kiddie Nation, where gigantic stores dedicated to children's paraphernalia push countless can't-live-without-'em educational toys, and Web sites tout classes that create junior Einsteins. Nobody sets out to have a child-centered marriage; it happens when commercial and cultural pressures collide with your own best intentions—and your nagging doubts about whether you're doing enough

for your offspring. Parents get caught up in making sure that their children have only the best, and that they rack up achievements. “It's almost as if you're failing your kids if you don't lavish endless attention on them,” says Betsy Brown Braun, author of *You're Not the Boss of Me*. “Competitive parenting is a new national pastime. Unfortunately, kids can stress out from the pressure of living their parents' dreams, and parents may stress about keeping up.”

On top of all that lavishing, there's a living to earn, a house to tend,

errands to run, and still no more than 24 hours in a day because there isn't an app for that (yet). We're left with little time and energy for ourselves, let alone our relationships. Jocelyn Goldberg, 43, a corporate event planner in Boston, recalls a recent night when her 8-year-old had a sleepover at a friend's, and she and her husband had time to themselves. “And what did we do? We roamed around Target, came home, and watched TV in separate rooms,” she recalls. “I woke up on the couch and thought, *I've gone from having a husband to having a roommate. Something's got to change.*”

It doesn't help that wives tend to take on more of the household chores. “When women feel overwhelmed or resent that their husbands aren't doing their share, a desire for sexual intimacy can go out the window,” notes Joy Davidson, Ph.D., a New York City sex therapist. Even among egalitarian couples, an exhausting kids-first agenda can leave men and women feeling decidedly unfrisky.

A less obvious effect of this emotional-intimacy deficit: anxious and



unhappy kids. “Our studies show that how a couple's relationship is going has an impact on how the kids are doing,” says Philip Cowan, Ph.D., an emeritus professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. He's studied families for decades with his wife, psychologist Carolyn Pape Cowan, Ph.D. When parents are so focused on their children that they don't have the time or energy to relate as a couple, he notes, they're more likely to grow discontented. Kids can pick up on the unhappiness and feel insecure about family unity; that anxiety could lead to problems such as depression or aggression. And when adults pour their attention into their children instead of their spouses, the balance of power is skewed. “Kids end up thinking they're the center of the universe,” says Code, “and might act selfishly and manipulatively.”

So how can two overworked, over-tired, overeverythinged parents realistically stay connected and dodge these problems?

• **First rule: Start small** “Don't think, *We'll change our lives! We'll have date night every single weekend!* Because big shifts like that aren't realistic,” says Philip Cowan. Adds Davidson: “The trick is to make the most out of being together and create bubbles of intimacy throughout the day.” For example, Jocelyn Goldberg, she of the Target date, now wakes her husband 15 minutes earlier every morning so they can chat over coffee. Other couples report dining à deux after the kids are asleep at least one night a →

week. “Every now and then on a Saturday night, my husband and I have our own little party,” says Diana Tynan, 33, a mom with kids ages 3 and 2 in Maplewood, NJ. “We watch movies, drink beer, play Springsteen albums, stay up too late. It takes off the pressure of parenthood. Suddenly, it’s just us again.”

Wendy Unker, a 39-year-old mom from West Hartford, CT, who has kids ages 6, 9, and 12, had a moment of relationship awakening when her in-laws took the children for the day. “My husband and I were downright giddy—we realized the kids had consumed our lives, and we’d had barely

band text-message to say hi and share discoveries, like a new movie they’ve read about and want to see on their next night out. “My husband and I have a fun way of communicating via cell phone pictures,” says Alle Ries, 38, from Atlanta. “If he’s in a bad mood, I’ll send him a shot of my smile to let him know I’m thinking of him. Or at work, I’ll get a buzz from my phone and find a shot of a flower he saw on the way to the office. It feels great to know he’s thinking of me.”

• **Try new things together** Last year, Julia Langley, 44, a Bethesda, MD, mom with two kids ages 12 and 14, signed up for the Susan G. Komen

“We’re focusing more on each other; with the spotlight off them, the kids are less clingy”

any couple time in a year,” she says. “After that, we started doing everyday things together, like preparing dinner as the kids played. We feel more bonded. And our older daughter—who’s had a frustrating habit of interrupting our conversations and generally demanding a lot of attention—has backed off. I think she’s getting that we’re not just Mom and Dad; we’re a couple.”

• **Have kid-free conversations** “When I’m out with my husband, our rule is, we don’t discuss the kids; we’re all about us,” says Hilda Hutcherson, M.D., a mom of four and an ob-gyn in New York City who regularly dispenses that advice to patients. Code gives this suggestion: “At the end of your day, share a highlight and a lowlight, ideally not involving the kids—one specific thing that made you really happy during the day, and one specific thing that annoyed you. It helps you instantly connect, and sparks longer conversations.”

• **Stay in touch during the day** Quickies are fine; Dr. Hutcherson and her hus-

band text-message to say hi and share discoveries, like a new movie they’ve read about and want to see on their next night out. “My husband and I have a fun way of communicating via cell phone pictures,” says Alle Ries, 38, from Atlanta. “If he’s in a bad mood, I’ll send him a shot of my smile to let him know I’m thinking of him. Or at work, I’ll get a buzz from my phone and find a shot of a flower he saw on the way to the office. It feels great to know he’s thinking of me.”

3-Day for the Cure, a walk to raise awareness about breast cancer. “I trained on weekends, and asked my husband to join me,” she says. “It’s been a challenge finding ways to connect as the girls get older and their schedules get more hectic. The walks gave us concentrated time together without the pressure of making scintillating conversation. If we had that, great. If not, we’d fall into a rhythm of walking that brought us close without words. We still keep up those walks.”

• **Bring on the PDA** Nobody’s suggesting you make out in front of the kids, but being affectionate keeps you connected and shows the children an important part of your marriage. “You’re modeling what a good relationship is like—helpful for your children down the road,” says Braun.

• **Make pleasure a priority** “Spontaneity may be more fun, but if you’re realistic and plan for sex, at least you’ll have it,” says Davidson. “Even if you’re tired, once you engage your senses you *will* get into it.” A mother

of two told me conspiratorially, “We sneak in sex when we can. It’s surprising how hot ‘quick!-the-kids-are-in-the-backyard-lock-the-door-and-let’s-do-it’ sex can be.” Any kind of intimacy is important, notes Dr. Hutcherson: “I tell patients to hold hands or spoon when they fall asleep. The pleasure chemicals released from skin-to-skin contact bond you.”

• **Don’t be a martyr** Getting your husband to do his fair share around the house means you’ll be less zonked, less resentful, and more up for sex. “Don’t ask your husband to ‘help’ you,” says Davidson, “because that implies housework and child rearing are *your* job and he’s just pitching in. It’s far better to say, ‘We need to share tasks. When I do most of them, not only do I lack energy for sex, but I’m not in the mood.’”

I’m happy to report that these ideas are doable. I’ve put a bunch of them into practice. When Dave and I are working, we e-mail each other little notes to say “I (heart) you” or to share funny stuff (pictures from awkward familyphotos.com always make us laugh). We’ve been cooking Sunday brunch together while the kids play on the computer, and every night, we talk about the day’s highs and lows. When we go out to dinner, we discuss the kids during the car ride there, and that’s it. Oh, and said kids now sleep in their own rooms, on blow-up beds (Dave’s genius idea; they think they’re camping out). And we make it a point to turn in a little earlier.

Since we’ve been increasingly focusing on each other, the kids have been doing more things on their own; removing the spotlight has made them less clingy. As for Dave, I feel closer to him than I have in years. The anniversary of the day we met is coming up—and I’ll remember it. ■