

BALANCING FAITH, FAMILY & PRACTICESM

The Quality Fallacy

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The other evening I was lying on the couch, my head swimming with the problems of the day, when my 5-year-old daughter approached me with a book in her hand. “Daddy, will you read a book to me?”

“Not right now, sweetheart,” I sighed and rubbed my aching forehead. “Daddy’s too tired.” She looked at me with her big blue eyes, tears forming at the corners, then dropped her head and shuffled away. I felt lousy, but I was really exhausted.

I noticed I was saying that sort of thing too often. I felt like I’d routinely race through the day at such great speed that it would be over before I had time to think. I’d usually collapse on the couch and think, But I still have more to do!

That lousy feeling prompted me to confront myself with questions about my time management—specifically, how I prioritize my time. Do I plan wisely or carelessly, without thinking about what’s most important? If I could go to some sort of “time dealer” and buy more of it, my problems would be solved.

We’ve been duped

Our consumer-driven society tells us, “Work hard, make more

money and buy lots of stuff. Put in more hours and get a bigger paycheck. In fact, why not go out and borrow a little money?” I don’t know if you struggle with the same dilemma, but I feel pressured to spend more time than I should at work, just to afford the lifestyle I’m “told” I should have. I deserve it, the ads say.

But the extra time at work is time taken away from home, the very place where my other duties are—parent, spouse, part-time househusband. These are arguably more important responsibilities.

How do I find time to be a good parent to my children? When I feel like collapsing, my kids are just ramping up. If I’ve been gone all day—or all week—they are even hungrier for my attention. My feelings of exhaustion clash with my kids’ yearning for love.

For many years, I have heard experts talk about planning quality time with your kids. If you don’t have much time left for the children, they say, make the minutes really count. Do something extra special so your family will have wonderful memories to last a lifetime.

I can’t help but wonder: Is there really such a thing as quality time? The compact, prebooked bonding times I try to pull off with my kids put a lot of pressure on me—and them. I know from experience the Big Day sometimes turns out to be the Big Flop. These are moments I’d rather forget.

Last fall, I took my son on an eight-hour odyssey by train, plane and car to go fishing with his uncle in northern Ontario. We finally made it to the remote lake, cast our lines and soaked up the spectacular wilderness around us. After 15 minutes of waiting for the first bite, my son got restless and fidgety.

“I don’t like fishing,” he blurted out. “Can we go now?” My heart sank like a lead weight to the bottom of the lake. Didn’t he realize how lucky we were to be there, sharing a guys’ bonding experience? Nope, he was cold, and the fish weren’t biting.

What if, after all the careful planning, the weather turns rotten, the park is overcrowded, or the child—or parent—is tired? Kind of spoils the day, doesn’t it? Even worse if it’s the only time we have together that day, week or month.

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Go for ordinary

I am beginning to think that in my quest for quality time, I've been overlooking the importance of quantity time. A basic ingredient in a healthy parent-child relationship is lots of time together—lots of time doing the ordinary, everyday things in life, as well as the special occasions. While out-of-the-ordinary events may be exciting and (if all goes well) memorable, they're not enough to build a deep relationship with my little ones.

The more time I spend with my kids, the more likely I'll be there to witness those milestone moments—the first step, the first bike ride, the first goal.

I must say, I've been caught off-guard when a deep philosophical discussion blossoms out of an everyday conversation with our 9-year-old when tucking him in at bedtime. It may be totally unplanned, but it's no less valuable. Bathtime might lead to conversations about body parts, boys and girls and the birds and the bees. Playing catch might be the catalyst for a chat about friends, bullies or God. In our house, special moments can happen at the kitchen table, in the playroom or in the back yard.

Kids also need time to get their ideas out. I can't rush them. They need time to warm up to talking. They need to feel listened to, and

they need good old-fashioned playtime. It's hard to schedule play into a finite time slot. When the kids are young, they want Mom or Dad to play along.

So I tell myself, Just sit down with them and join in. Forget the to-do list and the umpteen phone calls you need to make. Leave the laundry until tonight—or until the other half gets home. I've never regretted spending more time with my children. I have regretted putting them off.

Once in a while I remind myself of what's really important: I leave my agenda in my pocket, step out the door and walk, letting my little ones decide where we go. On a recent day off we walked downtown and visited the dollhouse store, the collectible toy-soldier shop, the chocolate store, the library and the only variety store in town with the right kind of hockey cards. It was a wonderful afternoon of accomplishing nothing but talking about all sorts of important things. "What makes a stranger strange?" "What would it be like to own a chocolate shop?" "Could God pick me up and carry me when you're tired, Daddy?" Great questions—and totally spontaneous.

As life goes along, we need to talk to our children and really listen. We must teach them our family values and ethics. They need to see how we encounter the world so they'll know how to handle it when

it's their turn. Parents have so much wisdom to share—we just need the time to do it.

Sure, it's tough to sacrifice the time; it means doing less grown-up things and perhaps not accomplishing as much in terms of my career, but I know it's something my heavenly Father expects. He instructed the ancient people of Israel to teach their children about the basic truths of life "when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:7). He didn't mention theme parks or movie theaters or special family vacations. They're great when they happen, but I mustn't wait for those infrequent occasions. My kids need me today—and for many tomorrows to come.

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