



Parent Tips

The Truth about Quantity Time with YOUR KIDS

By Jonathan McKee

She slowly meandered down the grocery aisle pushing her shopping cart with her right hand, talking into her phone in her left... all while completely ignoring her 8-year-old daughter walking beside her.

As much as we'd hope this isn't a snapshot of our typical time spend with our own children, if we are completely honest with ourselves, this scene might just look all too familiar.

"But at least I'm spending time with my kids."

Really? I guess that depend on your definition of "spending time."

How effective is the quality time between parent and child when they are...

- Silently sitting and watching TV together?
- Dragging our kids on errands with us?
- Sitting at the dinner table together while Mom and Dad argue about bills?

As much as we'd like to believe that "quantity time" in itself will pay off, a fascinating new study out of the Journal of Marriage and Family(1 contends mere quantity time isn't enough. In fact, the study reveals the amount of time parents spend with their kids between 3 and 11 has virtually no relationship to how children turn out. Remarkably, the study found "one key instance when parent time can be particularly harmful to children—when parents, mothers in particular, are stressed, sleep-deprived, guilty and anxious."

Hold the phone! Does this mean we shouldn't "hang" with our kids?

Please don't stop reading at the headlines... because the report goes on to talk about teenagers. Note the ages mentioned above: kids between 3 and 11. If we keep reading the report, the authors note one key instance in when quantity time does matter: adolescence.

And I quote:

The more time a teen spends engaged with their mother, the fewer instances of delinquent behavior. And the more time teens spend with both their parents together in family time, such as during meals, the less likely they are to abuse drugs and alcohol and engage in other risky or illegal behavior. They also achieve higher math scores.

This new report isn't alone in these findings. Columbia University has been noting this connection between "quantity time" and raising healthy kids for years in their Family Dinners reports(2).

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So what can we take away from this new report? After all, it seems to contradict conventional wisdom that the more time moms and dads spend with kids, the better.

I think this report brings several realities to light:

ONE

Proximity doesn't produce quantity time.

If we bring our kids to the grocery store with us, ignoring them the entire time, talking on our phones, occasionally barking at them, "Put that down!"... we aren't clocking healthy bonding time. Bonding necessitates dialogue. So if you're going to drag your kids on errands with you, make it fun. Interact with them. Ask them their favorite meal and have them help you shop for it. Do more listening than talking. Make them feel noticed and heard.

TWO

Adolescents have different needs than kids.

It's counterintuitive, because just when our teens—and even tweens—begin pushing us away... they need us the most. No, this doesn't mean smothering them or putting them on a leash. This simply means parents need to be proactive about looking for opportunities to bond with their kids. Healthy parenting requires healthy investments of both bonding and boundaries. Are you investing in both? Which bank is getting more deposits this month?

THREE

Don't use quality time as an excuse to avoid quantity time.

If your kids are like mine, you'll experience one or two quality time moments for every dozen times you hang out with your kids. Quality time usually necessitates quantity time. Parents need to clock quantity hours having fun with their kids, talking, laughing...listening! You never know when quality time moments will materialize.

Let's be honest. Quality time takes effort. It's more than just proximity. It requires a proactive effort to discover places where you can engage your kids in meaningful conversation... and a lot of patience when they don't.

Where is a place you can spend some quantity time with your kid this week... and maybe even get some quality time?

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- 1- http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/making-time-for-kids-study-says-quality-trumps-quantity/2015/03/28/10813192-d378-11e4-8fce-3941fc548f1c_story.html
- 2- <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-research/reports/importance-of-family-dinners-2012>