

How to Stay Married While Raising Children

by Bea Strickland

"Isn't it ironic that you get married to be close; being close brings you children; and then the children put a wedge between you?" sighed a young mother. While children bring some of life's greatest joys they're also at the root of some very big headaches.

Children interfere with three essential areas of marriage: communication, intimacy and sexuality.

Communication is crucially important. It's essential to keep up with each others interests, ideas, thoughts, concerns, and needs. Also, good communication helps you become aware of problems and to solve them more easily and comfortably.

Children often disrupt the communication between a husband and wife. Accidentally or on purpose, children want all of their parents' attention and time. "This is MY Mommy and MY Daddy; they belong to me!" is what the child seems to be saying. And of course, nothing is as precious as when it is taken away. When the attention shifts away from the child, he wants it back.

Intimacy means sharing love and affection, appreciation, and emotional support. It's important to have time alone to relax or work on your own sometimes but you need quality time with your spouse, too. "I want him to really listen to me and understand what I mean as well as what I say," said a young woman. Intimacy can be a mere moment when you share your feelings or an extended time when you feel as one: vulnerable, not-judged for any weakness or mistake, special to the other person. Intimacy is an important part of sexuality and often a prelude to sex.

Raising children takes time and energy. There is a lot less time to be intimate and to focus on just "you two". No one relates easily and smoothly when they're worn out. The moments that used to happen spontaneously aren't there anymore, and it seems to be too much of an effort to make them happen. Sometimes you know something's missing, but you're not sure what it is; sometimes you don't have time to notice. The attention you used to give each other is now given to the children and their needs. Teenagers stay up later than you do. Some of your privacy is gone, and you're more remote from one another.

Sexual expression is a valuable part of marriage. Sex can be fun, an expression of closeness, and part of our biological nature. Mutual pleasure, touching, and intercourse are accepted as our marital privilege .

Sexuality inevitably suffers when you have children. "She used to enjoy sex as much as I did, but now she never feels like it," complains a husband. Desire diminishes. By the time the kids are in bed, it's too late, you're too tired, there are interruptions, your minds are preoccupied, and it just doesn't seem worth the effort. Differences of opinion regarding discipline strain your relationship. It seems that children drain not only your time and energy but also your self esteem: Who feels attractive and sexy when the baby spits up on you or when you're drenched after bath time, or you've just had an argument with your teenager?

So what do we do about it?

What can you do about regaining your relationship?

1. Talk about the problem! Let your spouse know how much you value the time you spend talking and that you want to know how things are going. "I love you and I want us to be close again."
2. Be interesting. Have some ideas to talk about besides just kids or work. Jot down something that you'd like to talk about so that when you get some time you'll have some to share. Widen your field of interest by reading about current events. Keep an article handy to read for that surprise spare moment.
3. Plan time for spontaneity! Make couple time a priority. Plan some time to be alone. Let the children know that you two need some time to be together without interruption. "Mommy and Daddy need time to talk for a few minutes." Be patient, this idea takes months to establish.
4. Schedule some time away. Go on a date. Take time for a cup of coffee and dessert at a nearby restaurant without the children. Swap children with friends who want to do the same thing. Have a couple weekend or overnight away. Plan ahead so that you'll have the happy anticipation of your moments together.
5. Establish a "problem free time" when you don't discuss family problems.
6. Show affection. Realize that affection, apart from sex, is important. Verbal compliments, full attention, eye contact and hugs are rewarding to both of you and a valuable example to your children.
7. Don't nod off by the TV. Get enough rest and sleep so that you're alert for each other.
8. Have fun. Laugh and play with each other. Just because you're a parent doesn't mean you need to stop enjoying each other. Don't forget how much fun romance is. Closeness is enhanced with the little touch of flowers, candles, short love notes, or whatever you believe is romantic. One young couple was thrilled with the changes they made; "It takes some effort, but it's worth it! "

Children are important in your life, but so is your marriage! Children need your attention and nurturing, but so does your marriage! Make time and take time for communication, intimacy, and sexuality; you can rediscover the relationship you had when you were courting. Ironically, a close relationship will actually improve your relationship with your children.

Perhaps, an even more important benefit, your loving life together will be a model for your children and their future relationships.

Bea Strickland