



Russ McClelland and son, Iain, fishing together.

photo by Chris Fritchie

## A “How-To” Guide for Family Time

By R. Scott Gornito, MDiv, LMFT, AAPC

**SARAH LEANS** toward her husband, her face beet red with frustration and with an edge to her voice says, “You never spend time with the kids! You work from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and on the weekends all you want to do is play golf, watch sports and do stuff for you! And I am ...” Before Sarah can finish her thought Robert lashes back sarcastically, “You’re right; you’re always right.” After a brief pause Robert continues, “I am so tired of being criticized for not doing enough with the family. Compared to my dad, I am a saint.” He redirects his attention to me, “My dad left my mom when I was nine and I rarely saw him growing up.” His voice cracks; his sadness is palpable. Robert’s anger softens and he says, “My dad did not teach me or my brother what it was like to spend time doing family stuff. I wish I had a ‘how-to’ guide on family time.”

Unfortunately, Robert is not alone.

Whether due to the influence of our family of origin (the people who reared us) or our lack of an intentional plan, many of us have little direction when it comes to the nuts and bolts of spending time with the family. With many family schedules overloaded with work, school, homework, band and sporting events, creating space to spend time together can be challenging.

### QUALITY AND QUANTITY TIME

The quandary of quality vs. quantity has long been a source of debate. In regard to family time, these two terms do not have to be mutually exclusive. One of the first steps in developing a plan for family time is to create space for both quality time and quantity.

Research suggests that kids spend about 40 minutes each week in conversation with their parents and about 12 hours each week watching TV. (Some

research shows many teenagers watch up to four hours of TV a day.) Furthermore, kids hear over 1,000 commands a day. “Don’t play with your food.” “Go clean your room.” “Brush your teeth.” If a relationship between a parent and child is limited to a few minutes a day in conversation and most of that conversation is filled with parental commands, the potential for relational disconnection is imminent.

Couples and families come to see me with concerns about bonding with their kids, and in some cases they find it formidable, or worse, disheartening. After considering the context of the family, their history and their current issues, I offer them a few challenges. First and foremost, set aside a time to enjoy being together – do something fun. This is intentional, scheduled time for the entire family to enjoy being together, time that is both engaging and entertaining.

## Example of a Weekly Family Gathering

NOTHING GETS in the way (TV and cell phones off) and everyone schedules his or her life around this time. Be clear that each person understands and owns the importance of this time and that it takes precedence over other activities or obligations.

Sunday 6-7 p.m.

**Icebreaker** – Share experiences from the preceding week. “What experience this week frustrated you?” “What friend have you connected with this week?” “What is something that has happened to you this week that you are proud of?”

**Spiritual Devotion** – This could be based on a book or scripture that has meaning to you. The facilitator can share for three to five minutes and then have a discussion for a few minutes. The family rotates each week until each person in the family brings a thought, theme or scripture and facilitates the time.

**Family Calendar** – Talk about what is coming up that week. Everyone brings their schedules, including work, school, homework, sports practice, etc., and maps out the family schedule.

**Prayer** – Each person in the family can share about their desire or need for prayer or pray for someone else. Persons in the family that are comfortable praying can pray and those who are not can abstain.

Total time is 45-60 minutes



*Taking a stroll with the family is a way of “being present” with those you love.*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

This time is focused on actually “being with” others. Examples include: making eye contact, listening to one another, laughing and talking. This entails more than simply watching a movie or being in the same room as each person’s attention is somewhere else (i.e., reading books, watching TV, surfing the Internet or playing video games).

### HERE ARE SOME PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING IT WORK:

- Be intentional about the time you spend together. Plan a once-a-week time to be together (put it on the family calendar). Spend time outdoors, go for walks, swim, camp, ride bikes, play board games or bowl. Eat breakfast and dinner together a minimum of three mornings and nights a week.
- Make a family calendar. Discuss upcoming activities. Include each family

member in the decision-making and allow them to lead a particular time for that week. Build a sense of ownership. Be intentional about not allowing conflicts with scheduled family time (i.e. work, friends, church or other activities).

Families can also add another once-a-week time family gathering/meeting that could include elements such as an icebreaker, a spiritual devotion, family calendar planning for the week or prayer.

These suggestions for quality family time will likely be helpful for you, but contrary to popular belief, building family connection and bonding is not simply about the quality of time. It is also about the quantity of time. These moments in time can be more spontaneous, more fluid and unexpected. Common examples include running errands together and talking about what is going on in each other’s lives, playing catch in the backyard or joining the kids in something

they are already doing such as playing a video game.

### BEING PRESENT

About 20 percent of my practice is working with adolescents ages 12-18. Once I sift through the frustration they have with their parents, one of their underlying needs is a craving to be noticed, to be wanted, to have their parents take interest in them. In this regard, there is absolutely no substitute for time. One of the primary ways that kids experience love from parents is time invested. Child psychologist Fran Scott states, "Every child needs at least one person who's crazy about him/her." In other words, every child needs someone who loves them irrationally.

Recently, I officiated at my cousin's wedding. During the ceremony I spontaneously shared these words: "Nothing tells the other that you want them or desire them more than making the conscious decision to be present with the other." "Being present," by definition, means to make a cognitive and emotional decision to be physically and mentally with another. This not only is true in adult relationships such as marriage, it is also true with kids. Kids have a way of letting you know when you are not present with them. Parents who decide to be present with their children tell them they are wanted or desired! What a compelling reason to spend time together as a family! This begins with each person choosing to be physically, emotionally and mentally present.

A close friend of mine recently shared a story about his love addiction (non-technically speaking) with his iPhone. Since purchasing the device, he confessed to me with humor and honesty, he tries to steal away small amounts of time each day to download new applications and music and maximize all the features the phone has to offer.

Recently, he went to the restroom in the building where he works. As he walked down the hallway back to his office, he realized that he left his phone next to the sink where he washed his hands. Immediately, his heart began to race, his blood pressure increased, and his palms began to sweat as he sprinted back to the bathroom. Out of breath and traumatized, he threw open the door

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*A push on the swing pulls families together*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

and, to his great pleasure, saw the phone sitting quietly next to the sink. He quickly pulled the device up to his chest like a newborn and found himself saying, "It will be OK, honey. I am so sorry daddy left you here."

Many of us have developed this kind of pathological relationship or affection for our media devices. The same phenomenon applies to kids as well. Conversation between them and their friends has become less verbal and more focused on texting. The text-centered world we have created can often be a hindrance to "being with" people, even when you're in the same room.

In October 2005, my best-friend/brother-in-law was tragically killed. This loss was devastating for my family, including my sister and her kids, and for me as well. The loss catapulted me into a period of depression and preoccupation with thoughts of Kyle and my family of origin. Unfortunately, at home with my immediate family, I found myself physically present but emotionally and mentally absent. As you can imagine, it was difficult for my kids and my wife, and the result was a season of distance and frustration in my marriage. Thankfully, I learned a valuable lesson from that experience: The greatest gift I can give my wife and kids is to be truly present with them when we are together.

The choice to be truly present with our families communicates what we all need to hear most – that we are loved and desired. Your family will get that message if you take advantage of every opportunity to make the time you spend with them both intentional and spontaneous and high in quantity as well as quality.

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*Scott Gornto is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who practices in Plano at HopeWorks Counseling Center and lives in Frisco.*

YOU DON'T HAVE to leave the house to have family fun... Build a pizza together at home. Start from scratch and let the kids "throw" the crust in the air like at a real pizzeria. Or, for a change of pace, how about a dessert pizza? Try making this yummy fruit pizza; bake the crust first and then let the kids "decorate" the pizza with the fruit listed in the recipe or let them use their creativity and cover it with the fruit toppings of their choice.

## Fruit Pizza

### CRUST:

1 ¼ c. all-purpose flour  
 ½ c. butter, softened  
 1 tsp. cream of tartar  
 ½ tsp. baking soda

¾ c. sugar  
 1 egg  
 ¼ tsp. salt

### FILLING:

½ c. sugar  
 1 (8oz.) package cream cheese

2 tsp. vanilla extract

### GLAZE:

1 Tbsp. cornstarch  
 ½ c. orange juice  
 ½ tsp. orange zest

½ c. sugar  
 1 pinch salt  
 ¼ c. water

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream together butter and ¾ cup sugar. Mix in egg. Combine flour, cream of tartar, baking soda, and salt; stir in the creamed mixture until just blended. Press into an ungreased pizza pan. Bake at 350 for 8-10 minutes.

In a saucepan, combine ½ cup sugar, salt, cornstarch, orange juice, lemon juice and water. Stir over medium heat. Bring to a boil and cook for 1-2 minutes, until thickened. Remove from heat, add grated orange zest. Allow to cool, but not set up.

Beat cream cheese with ½ cup sugar and vanilla until light. Spread on cooled crust.

Arrange desired fruit on top of filling. Spoon glaze over fruit. Chill for two hours, cut into wedges and serve.

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

