

Working Parents And Child Development

It is a common challenge that parents face: they must work while at the same time strive to meet the needs of their growing children.

Caught between a rock and a hard place and needing to pay the bills, working parents often worry if their children are suffering from their lack of availability. In truth, there are some children who are suffering.

Some children who do not have adequate time with their parents are at risk of living a life feeling adrift, not connected in a positive relationship in a manner that lends itself to productive behaviour. These children are at risk of unproductive behaviour that could eventually be counter to their well being and development leading, at worst, to self-destructive behaviours including social withdrawal, early onset sexual behaviour, drug and alcohol use, truancy and delinquency.

It is important to know that children derive their sense of self-esteem by the quality and quantity of direct care provided by their parents. To the degree parents are available and active in the lives of their children, the children develop an internal sense of self-worth. They also develop a sense of trust in a caring world. Beyond self-worth and trust, time with parents allows for the transmission of values and morals. In spending time with one's children, offering guidance, direction and discipline along the way, the children naturally pick up on their parents' attitudes, beliefs, morals and values. Assuming reasonable parents, their time with the children thus begets reasonable children.

In view of realities where a parent's work interferes with their time available with the children, strategies must be developed to help both parent and child cope with the lack of availability to maximize the opportunity for good outcomes.

Strategies include seeking ways to help children continue to feel connected to their parents during times of absence. In infants and toddlers, smell provides a powerful connection. If the parent has a favourite cologne or perfume, placing a tiny amount on the child's blanket or plush toy can be soothing to a child who thus senses a connection to the absent parent. The toddler can have their own photograph of their parent so the visual reminder serves as their connection and because preschoolers have the use of language, caregivers can remind these children of their parent's love and time of return to help them cope and bridge gaps in time.

To facilitate the transmission of morals, values and parental authority, caregivers can also be asked to remind children that any directives, expectations or guidance they deliver are at the behest of their parents. Hence the caregiver is "channeling" the parents who are thus kept front and center in the lives of their children.

Beyond the strategies to cope with time apart, time together must include opportunity for pleasurable activity and engagement between parent and child. Please note, that time together does not include indulging one's child to assuage one's guilt for lack of availability. Indulging only serves to create a sense of expectancy of something for nothing or an attitude of self-righteousness in the child. This in turn could cause children to behave solely in their own interest when older and that could undermine their intimate or work related relationships, as these relationships require an interest in the other for success.

Meaningful time together includes bath and bedtime for the younger child as well as meals together with children of any age. So that children understand there are still expectations and required activities, parents and children can participate in household chores, making the activity fun and lighthearted along the way.

Lastly, parents must not shy away from correcting or disciplining their children. Such must be free of abusive, shaming or demeaning behaviour and rely upon reasonable strategies such as time out, an early bedtime or loss of a privilege for a brief time. It bears advising that the perceived severity of any consequence will be in the comparison to life with parents when all is otherwise well. In other words, all other time the parent spends with their children should be reasonable and respectful.

Work may be a must but using these strategies to mitigate your absence can help facilitate your children's healthy emotional, and moral development.

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