

## **Rekindling the Passion... After Kids**

*Lost that lovin' feeling? Take heart. Parents really can have a love life.*

by Carrie and Gary Oliver

When Beth and Brad came to me (Carrie) for marriage counseling, I asked how I might be of help. Brad jumped right in, "The birth of our first child was such a major answer to prayer." He reached over and took Beth's hand as he continued, "It took us several years to get pregnant and when we finally got the good news, we decided we were going to do it right." They took classes, they read books and they talked with friends who already had children. After a brief pause Brad continued, "The one thing that caught us totally off guard was the impact being parents would have on our sexual relationship."

Today's parents have plenty of resources to prepare for pregnancy, childbirth, and baby care. But few are prepared for the effects on their marriage: the redefinition of roles, the realignment of responsibilities, and the reduction of time together that often results in the decreased frequency and intensity of sexual experiences. It's a wonder anybody gets pregnant for the second time!

Can you have a love life after children? Through God's grace and a little bit of work, the answer is yes! In fact, our own experience and those of hundreds of couples we've counseled is that working through the changes parenting brings can lead to a new depth of understanding, trust, and security that can actually deepen your marriage and increase your desire for sexual intimacy. Really!

Where has the love gone? Parenthood is one of God's greatest gifts, but it can take a toll on the emotional and physical intimacy level in your marriage. The couple time that was so easy to find before having children is something that now has to be carved out. But even then, your best efforts can be thwarted by a whole host of challenges.

**No time.** Children are demanding and their needs are often immediate. If you're all snuggled up with your spouse and little Molly gets out of bed to report that she's about to throw up, your desire is probably going down the toilet with everything else. Once children get older, time can become even more precious. Between running kids to school, church, practice, and taking care of your own work and activities, you may find that you hardly see each other. Finding time for sex seems impossible

**No energy.** Along with the time crunch comes a lack of energy. Hey, it doesn't matter how healthy you are or how often you work out, parenting young children is draining. We've had many husbands and wives talk about how they can barely crawl into bed at night, much less think about lovemaking.

This is especially true for women. Sexual desire seems to ebb and flow for women. In fact, recent research shows that almost 1 in 3 women experience difficulty feeling sexual desire even though they feel they are happily married. They note that the main reason for their low sexual desire is a lack of energy. The more tired a woman becomes, the less she is apt to think about sex, want sex, or actually have sex. Smart husbands have learned that helping their wife enjoy a good uninterrupted nap or some time to herself can be a form of foreplay.

**Too many demands.** At the same time, the lack of desire experienced by moms can go beyond the energy depletion. Whether you are an at-home mom or a woman who works outside of the home, your days consist of demands and expectations that don't end when the lights go out. For many women living in the demanding season of raising young children, sex can be perceived as just one more need they must fulfill for someone else.

**Lack of emotional connection.** It's easy for parents to forget to cultivate closeness and friendship within their marriage. But women often need to feel close before feeling sexual. Men often need to be sexual to feel close. While many couples recognize that their marriage has slid down their priority list, they often have no clue how to move it back toward the top.

**Negative body image.** During the childbearing years, many women struggle with a negative body image. I (Carrie) discovered that dealing with the reshaping of my body after giving birth required good self-esteem and a great sense of humor. I recently met with a group of women in their forties, and we discussed life during our child-bearing years. We talked about how we looked and how we felt. I don't recall any of us saying, "I sure felt sexy."

Our culture's messages about what makes a woman sexy are very powerful. We've worked with many women who, in spite of what their husbands told them, convinced themselves that they were unattractive and thus undesirable.

**No desire.** For some women, however, even increased rest and a close, emotionally satisfying marriage can't change the fact that they just don't feel like having sex. If that's your situation, we encourage you to talk with your doctor. While this element of women's health is just beginning to be explored by the medical profession, there is an increased understanding of the ways chemical factors such as hormone levels, depression, or anxiety impact a woman's sexual desire.

A loss of sexual desire after having children is typically thought of as a woman's problem. But many men experience lowered sexual desire as well.

Feeling tired and overwhelmed for long periods of time takes its toll on a man's sexual drive. Medical studies tell us that excess stress can lead to lowered levels of testosterone in men. A man with a stressful job or who doesn't have much down time can suffer this hormonal dip, which impacts his desire for sex.

Sadly, men can find it very difficult to admit this lack of sex drive. Our culture—even Christian culture—promotes the stereotype that men are always in the mood for sex. That stereotype is so ingrained that it can become part of a vicious cycle where a man feels even more stress for not being "manly" enough to want sex, thereby lowering his hormone levels even further and perpetuating the problem. As with women, men who experience a long-term loss of sexual desire should talk with their doctor to rule out physical causes.

**Getting your groove back.** Whatever issues keep you and your spouse from enjoying a satisfying sex life, one thing is certain: Your sex life impacts your children. Children feel most secure when they sense that their parents are passionate about each other. It is as vital to their development as all those chores and activities you do for them that exhausted you in the first place. In other words, you owe it to your children to do what it takes to rekindle the spark between you and your spouse.

“What it takes” will be different for every couple. Our first two boys arrived 19 months apart, and we experienced the craziness of having two preschoolers in the house. It didn't take us long to recognize that we had to redefine our relationship and rediscover each other.

As tempting as it was, we knew we couldn't put our marriage on autopilot—at least not if we wanted it to stay healthy. We knew that our friendship and romance had developed through the simple, consistent activities we did together. So, we decided to make time for those activities again.

Notice we said make time. As parents, we will never find time to do anything. You will have to determine in advance what is important, then make time to pursue it.

**Make time to talk.** Early in our relationship, we'd spend hours just talking. It became one of our most meaningful ways of growing closer.

Once we had kids, most of our conversations were about the boys and the business of parenting. So we decided to make time to “chat” with one another. My (Gary) experience is that, for most of us men, “chatting” doesn't come naturally, especially if it's about small stuff and relationships. However, I've learned that chatting is a very intimate experience for women.

When men choose to learn how to chat with their wives—to ask meaningful questions and really listen to the answers, to share their own feelings and desires—they are communicating interest and respect, building trust and closeness that will help their wives feel more emotionally intimate with them.

I'm not suggesting you fake your way through a conversation in hopes of having sex later on. Instead, we simply need to recognize that a woman's desire to “just talk” for a while is a real and valid need. When that need for an emotional connection is met, it will often translate into a renewed desire for a sexual connection as well.

**Make time to play.** On the other hand, a woman can learn that just sitting with her husband and not chatting can be very intimate for him! Men's friendship needs often look different than those for women. Men enjoy doing activities—golfing, biking, gardening, jogging. I (Carrie) encourage you to open yourself up to joining your husband in some of these activities.

Women aren't the only ones who want someone who trusts, respects, and understands them. Play together, laugh together, break out of your roles as parents and remind each other what brought you together in the first place.

As you renew your friendship, you'll increase the sense of comfort and safety you feel with one another, which leads to increased trust. That will often result in greater desire and increased intimacy.

**Share the load.** Of course all this connecting takes time and energy. As we mentioned earlier, we've worked with hundreds of couples who deeply loved each other but were simply too tired to be intimate.

Balancing the demands of work, home, and family requires a team effort. No one person can do it all. I (Carrie) love it when Gary joins me in the evenings to clean up after dinner or fold laundry. Ever since I told him that vacuuming and putting away the dishes is a kind of foreplay, he has been much more eager to help! Sexual intimacy often begins when a couple shares not just a bed but all aspects of their relationship.

**Be honest.** We've been surprised to find that couples often do not talk about sex, even when they are experiencing a problem. They may talk about the surface issues, such as frequency, exhaustion, or the lack of romance, but they don't talk about the details. Intimate and mutually satisfying sex requires that couples be willing to talk openly about sexual needs, wants, and expectations. Talking about these things doesn't always mean that all your needs will be met all the time, but it opens the door to a more honest, trusting relationship, which is at the heart of a satisfying sex life.

**Think good thoughts.** Most of us know that men are typically more easily aroused than women. I (Carrie) encourage the women I counsel to try giving sex some thought during the day. A romantic thought or two can really be helpful when you crawl into bed with your husband that night.

We also encourage both husbands and wives to think positively about each other as much as possible. It's so easy to focus on the ways our spouse is to blame for sexual problems. But thinking loving, kind, and tender thoughts about your spouse can help you feel more connected.

Having children presents tremendous blessings, challenges, and opportunities. One of those challenges is to keep your marriage healthy and growing in the face of constant distraction. But one of the opportunities that comes with parenthood is the chance to discover more about the complex person God created in your spouse.

**Give this area of your relationship over to prayer.** Talk to each other about what you really need and want from your sex life and your marriage. Commit yourselves to deepening your relationship for the sake of each other, and your kids.

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