

What Your Teen Really Needs

This principle to encourage your teenager isn't what you think

By Jim Burns

Q. *With three busy teenagers, our family life is incredibly chaotic. The stress is impacting the kids and our marriage. How can we get our lives back on track?*

A. While it is probably wise to re-evaluate your family activity level and scale back a bit, I find that families often make themselves busy in order to avoid the deeper issues that add stress to the family. So many of the parents of teens I know spend the bulk of their time in crisis mode. They spend their waking moments moving from breakfast to laundry to meetings to soccer practice to homework to dinner to church to the bills, and finally, to bed. I see them spinning the plates of marriage, children, work, home, church, extended family, and volunteer work. They tell me they are afraid that if they quit spinning, a plate will crash. So they keep on spinning.

Unfortunately, the plate that often gets neglected is the marriage. Sadly, it's often the kids who suffer the most when a marriage falls apart. Teens still need a strong home base and the sense of security that comes from knowing the adults in their lives are happy and healthy. In other words, when you work at making your marriage healthy, you will reduce the stress in your entire family.

One couple I know, Greg and Dana, hit a crisis when their kids were teenagers. Their marriage had never been what you would call a model marriage, but raising teenagers put too much strain on the relationship. Dana was pouring her life into her kids. Greg was pouring part of his energy into the kids and the rest into his work. On paper they looked good: They were active in church, hardly ever missed their kids' games, and helped with homework most every night.

The problem was that they seldom gave uninterrupted time to each other. When they did focus on each other they were usually too tired to give out anything but their "emotional

scraps." Greg was dangerously close to having an affair and Dana had resigned herself to having a miserable marriage.

One day their teenage son, Derrek, blurted out, "Why don't you two spend some time together? Other parents go out on dates and take time away. I don't know if I even want to get married if it is going to wind up like your marriage!" Greg and Dana were stunned. They hadn't considered that their kids would notice the distance between them. But here was Derrek, begging for security.

That night Greg and Dana went out for coffee. For the first time in a long time they had an honest talk about their relationship thanks to their son's comments. He needed them but he also needed them to love each other and make an investment in their marriage.

If your marriage is starting to look like Greg and Dana's, try some of these ideas:

Date nights. This is the time to court each other. You don't have to spend much—or any—money. Just get reacquainted. It will do wonders for your marriage and bring greater security to your teens.

House parties. Someone once said, "If the devil can't make you bad, he will make you busy." Plan regular "nights off" where your family simply hangs out together.

Time outs. In one family we know, Mom and Dad reserve 15 uninterrupted minutes after dinner to talk about the day and connect. It's amazing what a cup of hot tea and 15 minutes will do for a relationship.

Long kisses. Make a habit of squeezing in at least one 15-second kiss every day. And don't be afraid to do it in front of the kids. They might think it's gross but they will find more security in that kiss than they'll ever admit.

Keeping your marriage strong is one of the best things you can do for your teenager. So put down some of those plates and get busy reconnecting with the love of your life.