

3 Ways You Might Be Sabotaging Your Family Bond

Raising kids is a constant negotiation. We want them to be independent, to build meaningful friendships and to become their own person. And yet, a healthy family bond is essential to the well-being and flourishing of our children from birth through adulthood.

Unfortunately, even the most well-meaning parents often sabotage these relationships by doing a few common, but unhelpful things. Here are three:

1. **Equating “busy” with “healthy.”** We often buy the lie that what our kids need is to be kept busy so they don't get in trouble, or so they can make friends or so they feel like their lives have meaning. The problem is this is a myth. In reality, the dramatic increase in children's activity and the subsequent loss of free time has served to lessen creativity and increase anxiety and depression in kids.

More to the point of this article, it makes it virtually impossible for the typical parent to have more than a passing conversation with their child each day. And that “passing” conversation is typically punctuated with the instructions, “Take the earbuds out so you can hear me.”

If we're going to build lasting family bonds, we must be willing to say no to the tyranny of busy-ness. You can't create family bonds if you don't carve out time. One of the rules my wife and I made early on with our kids was that they could not participate in more than one extracurricular activity per season. We've had countless fights about this, but in the end, we're really grateful for that rule. It's allowed us to get pretty consistent time to connect as a family each night, even though some nights, that may only be

15 minutes.

2. **Allowing technology to win.** Speaking of “earbuds,” that’s a real problem in our house. Our kids love music and often listen to different types of music. This leads to four kids sitting in the same room with earbuds in while doing their homework. They might as well be in separate time zones. My wife recently came up with the rule that no one can have earbuds in while at home. Zero percent of the time. Needless to say, this was not greeted with fanfare. However, in the weeks since we’ve noticed a much different atmosphere. Conversation flows more freely. Siblings acknowledge one another—you know, like actual people.

Many of us feel helpless to take a stand against the onslaught of technology: smartphones, gaming, social media; there is so much vying for our kid’s attention that is way more interesting than we are. But if we want to build meaningful family bonds, we’ve got to have space to connect that is unimpeded by the escape of a screen. Set up rules about when screens get put away. Refuse to allow screens at the dinner table (you too, Dad). Set limits for usage (most smartphones have functions that allow you to limit screen time automatically). These rules will not be fun to implement (your kids will not cheer your efforts) but it will be worth it.

3. **Taking life too seriously.** Sometimes it takes science a while to catch up to what we know intuitively. For example, did you realize that laughing with someone increases the likelihood that you’ll form meaningful bonds? Laughing releases endorphins, which promote social bonding. So laugh with your wife and kids. If your kids are young have tickle fights (17-year-olds tend to be weird about that). Tell jokes. Watch movies that make all of you laugh. Laugh at yourself when you make mistakes. Listen to comedians or funny audiobooks while driving.

As much as possible, create an environment in which your family can have fun together. Obviously, life can't be one big laugh-fest. But figuring out how to make it a regular part of your family's life together will pay big dividends in creating lasting bonds.

Sound off: What have you done lately to create family bonds?
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