

Kids and Busy Parents

Joey's school grades are dropping. What's going on? And why are so many kids having behavioral problems? Parents want to know. Is life tougher for our kids than it was for us?

The search for answers may lead us to uncomfortable spots—our homes and our workplaces. Since 1969, research tells us, parents' time with children has diminished an alarming 22 hours per week. And according to Harvard researcher S. Jody Heyman, parental involvement matters. When parents are unable to deal with school difficulties, educational achievement falls, and behavioral problems increase.

The increasing demands of work are taking a toll on American families. Compared with a decade ago, people work 10 hours more per week. How to balance work and family is a hot discussion topic.

When work intrudes on family time, children suffer. "Quality time" is a misnomer. Children need quantity when it comes to parent involvement. The amount of time invested is directly related to the degree of psychological adjustment.

We invited a panel of teens into our adult Sunday school class to discuss the topic "How the media influence our families." Tom (not his real name) was the darling of every mom in the group. His love and respect for his father brought tears to our eyes.

"My dad is always there. He listens, guides and helps me make decisions about what to watch and listen to. It's not so much that he's telling me what to do but that he knows what's happening in my life. I know he cares. And when I screw up, he always prays with me."

Tom makes it sound simple. But the opposite of his experience—the lack of parental supervision—is directly linked

to our kids' involvement in drugs, alcohol, delinquency and sex. And it's not coincidental that more children get into major trouble at home between the hours of 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.—the time of day most likely to be unsupervised by working parents.

Parents from all socioeconomic strata are distressed. Unfortunately, the response by some parents is to lose interest in their kids. A study by a Temple University psychologist found that almost a third of high school students' parents simply disengage from their kids.

The solution far too often in the white suburban church is to chide working mothers. But studies show that children do better academically when mothers have good jobs but also have the flexibility to take time off to meet their needs. And for the working poor and single parents, having a job is not a matter of choice but of survival.

So what can be done to ease the tension between work and family time commitments? Make whatever changes you can to spend time with your children and be involved in their lives. Here are some suggestions:

- Turn off media and minimize adult distractions.
- Be less selfish about your own pursuits. Focus instead on improving your relationship with your child.
- Find employment that will allow for flexible time schedules, jobs close to home, telecommuting, home business or schedules that accommodate the needs of your children. This may mean a pay cut or lack of promotion, but the trade-offs are worth it.
- Change shifts.
- Schedule parent-teacher conferences in the evenings, during your lunch hour or on breaks.
- Network with your children's friends' parents. Don't allow children to be unsupervised after school hours. Arrange a rotating supervision schedule or a time at a

local YMCA or community program.

- Become emotionally involved with your children. Don't allow work to drain you to the point of exhaustion.
- Stay spiritually strong as a family. This requires praying together, reading the Word and intimately walking with your Father.

Though you may feel overwhelmed by work and family demands, simple changes such as turning off the TV every night can produce powerful effects. Ask God to speak to you if changes are needed, particularly in the area of work. Then trust Him to help you find ways to make those changes.