

GETTING IT TOGETHER WITH YOUR FAMILY

Many families—maybe yours—are feeling frazzled by a fast-paced life that takes members in every direction. But there are some things you can do about it.

by Theresa M. Shaltanis

Reprinted with permission from the July, 1997 issue of The Lutheran Witness

It seems to be a general phenomenon that American families are feeling more and more hurried and dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend together. Just look at the Jones family as a case in point.

Dad works 55 hours a week at a demanding position dealing with information systems. He also serves as an elder at church, teaches Sunday school, and coaches his son's soccer team.

Mom works 40 hours a week as an RN in the children's oncology unit of a local hospital. Beyond that, she's active in her Lutheran Women's Missionary League circle; does most of the cooking, cleaning and laundry in her family's household; volunteers as a homeroom parent; and is the chief chauffeur for two children.

Fourteen-year-old Todd delivers newspapers, plays soccer, baseball and basketball, and is active in his church youth group. Eight-year-old Lindsey stays just as busy with gymnastics, piano lessons and Brownies.

The Jones family is an honest representation of many American families who are trying to make ends meet, partake in a rich assortment of growth activities for both children and adults, and live out their Christian lives with regular worship and service to God. Yet, for their many strengths, a multitude of families, like the Joneses, are feeling frazzled. Their lives are moving in fast forward, and the time they spend together is more and more scarce.

How about your family? Feeling frazzled? Here are some things you can do to avoid, or at least reduce, some of the "stressors" on family life.

1. Have a Spiritual Center

God created us in His image, and we are spiritual beings. Having a common Christian faith helps families understand that each member is precious in God's sight, and that God provides us with guidelines for healthy living. Parents must see to it that their children are taught the Christian faith.

2. Having Quality and Quantity Time Together

Give up the notion that having one or the other will do. Healthy families need both quality (positive and intentional) and quantity (frequent) time together. And while all

family members need to commit to one another to do this, it is the parents who are responsible for making it happen. Remember, too, that because your time together is so precious, you should go light with the non-connecting activities, such as watching TV.

3. Honoring Family Rituals

Rituals are the celebrations of significant events in our lives. They can be either cyclical or developmental. Cyclical rituals are those that have a regular schedule which call us back to similar events during the course of a year. Examples include Christmas, Easter, birthdays, anniversaries, Sunday worship and family meals.

Developmental rituals generally happen only once in someone's life, such as Baptism, entering school, confirmation, graduation from a particular school, leaving home, marriage and so forth.

Families who celebrate these rituals honor the cycle of life as well as the cycle of the church year. Rituals say, "Each member of this family is important, and we together as a family are important."

Rituals are best when each family member participates in their planning and has a particular role in the event.

This prevents one member (usually mom) from being overwhelmed to "make or break" the event. Families can get ideas for their celebrations from the traditions of extended family members, or they can develop their own hybrid of ideas through brainstorming and books (the Concordia Publishing House catalog has some resources in the "Christmas Books" and "Christian Family & Parenting" sections).

4. Developing Family Goals and Managing Family Time

Healthy families take time to make goals. Make it a priority to have a weekly family meeting time (apart from daily or weekly family devotions). For the sake of regularity, and to give the session the form and feel of a family ritual, try to hold it at the same time and place each week.

The meeting should consist of sharing the events in each member's life, such as what is coming up in the next week. A dry-erase board can serve as the monthly calendar. Scheduled events can be recorded in a different color for each member, and a common color can be used when all parties will be involved in that event.

Being able to visualize what the upcoming weeks or months look like can help in making good decisions about what activities to choose or let go. Such meetings often reveal the ridiculousness of family members trying to do too many things at once (like the Jones family above). The key to dealing with a time crunch is not to do more, faster, but to simplify.

5. Developing Individual Goals and Having Personal Time

As with family goals and together time, people need to have personal goals and alone time. This is hard to do, especially for parents. Often, the only way to find time to make such personal pursuits possible is by learning the art of saying “No.” The cause may seem needful, the opportunity wonderful, but sometimes you just have to say, “I’m sorry, but I can’t take on that responsibility right now.”

Likewise, couples need time just for themselves. The time set aside for the couple should be placed on the family calendar for all to see. This is an excellent message to children about the importance of marriage, and taking care of your marriage is one of the best ways to love your children.

6. Having a Support System

When extended-family members are spread geographically, families need to be very intentional about building a support system through friends, co-workers, neighbors and their church family. This is especially true for single-parent families. No family is an island. We need others to help us, and we need to help them. Families can develop these important relationships by sharing such rituals as meals, play or worship.

7. Keeping Up With Communication

Healthy families check in with each other and are effective listeners as well as talkers. Such behavior needs to be consistently modeled by the parents if children are expected to be good communicators. Making time for one-on-one conversations is necessary on a weekly basis. If a family is riddled with frequent yelling, silent treatments or periods of tension, its members ought to seek counseling to learn some new patterns to help them feel closer to one another.

8. Having Clear Expectations and Rules

Consistency is a gift parents give to children. It includes having clear expectations of children, consistent rules, and allowing children to experience the consequences of their actions. It also involves parents forming a united front and backing each other up, instead of allowing a child to bring them into open disagreements about how to raise the child.

9. Dealing with Evil

The evils of our society are rife—far too prevalent to be ignored. They must be addressed. You will not do your children any favors by trying to shield them from every bad thing. In fact, doing so will only serve to pique your children’s curiosity and nudge them toward the forbidden fruit. Far better that you talk about the various evils, invite your children’s thoughts and feelings about them, and together see what God’s Word has to say about them.

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Families need to be prepared and equipped for the high points and struggles of daily life, as well as the times of crisis. By making a commitment to one another to spend intentional time together, to model respect and good communication from early on, and to keep Christ at the center, your family will be better able to weather the storms life may bring.

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Some of the Worst Family Stressors

As we look at the 1990's, we see some very real situations contributing to the stress of today's family. Let's take a look at some of the top stressors and what can be done to cope with the dizzyingly fast pace at which today's families are moving.

1. *The Need for Two Incomes.* While some families are able to meet their financial needs with one salary, the majority of today's families find that two incomes are not just a luxury but a necessity. Only about 15 percent of American household consist of a working father and stay-at-home mother. And, in many of these cases, the employed person is working more hours than the traditional 40 per week.

Besides meeting their regular expenses, families need to save for the future. Society's movement toward an increasingly competitive and specialized job market is making post-secondary education more and more necessary. The cost of such education, meanwhile, is constantly rising, more than doubling in the past decade alone. Looking even farther ahead, our increased life-expectancy would seem to attach more importance than ever to having a substantial retirement nest-egg.

With both mom and dad working, husbands and wives have the challenging task of working out a system for the division of home-related responsibilities. Also, parents need to find reliable and loving child care, as well as deal with the guilt of leaving their children in the care of others.

2. *Isolation from Extended Family.* Employment needs have taken people all over the globe—in many cases, away from relatives. As a result, families are feeling more isolated without the comforting assurance of relatives, with whom they share a common history. With frequent moves, it is also difficult to establish deep roots with friends and neighbors.

3. *Trying too Do More, Faster.* While we are afforded the luxury of a myriad of conveniences (fax, phone, dishwashers, e-mail, etc.), it seems that we have replaced the time we are saving with an increase in activities. Instead of having the pause

afforded by the regular mail, we now feel pressure to immediately fax or e-mail our information. We seem to want to fill every hour of our available time with yet another “good cause.”

4. *Sorting Through an Array of Information and Choices.* The information age has bombarded us with more material than we can ever hope to digest. This in itself—this incapability of processing so much stimuli—can be stressful.

Likewise, we have an increase in both the number and diversity of available activities—so many wonderful things to command our attention and time. It can be hard to prioritize and choose.

5. *Changes in the Make-Up of Today’s Families.* Single-parent families, blended families and multi-generational families have the difficult task of making their way with unique challenges. Since 1960, the atypical family is becoming more and more common, with divorce rates quadrupling and a 300 percent increase in children living in single-parent homes.

Many blended families are daunted to learn that it takes an average of five years to start feeling like a family. Many grandparents, drafted into the huge task of serving as the primary guardians of their children’s children, never really graduate to traditional “grandparent status.”

Atypical families absorb hurts and disappointments from not having the life they intended. Such families are also hit especially hard by inadequate finances and other means of support.

6. *Increased Exposure to Evil.* Poll most Americans, and they will tell you that things are getting worse. Violent crime is up 560 percent since 1960, child abuse up 400 percent since 1972. Movies, TV music and the Internet are exposing us to enough graphic and shocking material to leave us numb.

The above stressors (and others) take their toll on families by decreasing the ability of family members to make significant connections with one another. Being too busy, getting bombarded by too much information, and running into negative or offensive material at every turn, people are sorely challenged just to stay aware of their own feelings and needs, let alone those of others.

—T.M.S.

TIPS FOR HOLDING FAMILY MEETINGS

- 1.** Try to meet at the same time and place each week.
- 2.** Set a limited time with shorter times if children are younger.

- 3.** Have an appointed facilitator at each meeting. Children can have this role as they get older.
- 4.** Include a short prayer and/or devotion (there are several Concordia Publishing House resources to help with this).
- 5.** Allow time for each person to speak, sharing about his or her past week and what is ahead. Acknowledge accomplishments and lend support for discouragements.
- 6.** Record upcoming events on a dry-erase board calendar, with color-coded markers to represent each family member. Discuss any time conflicts and how they will be managed.
- 7.** Plan ways the family will spend time together, getting everyone's input.
- 8.** Allow for humor and fun at these meetings.

—T.M.S.
