

Parent/Child Dates

It has been almost ten years since I attended the funeral of a child I taught as a preschooler. He was a very special child; loyal and joyful, kind and generous, forgiving and strong. I loved this child dearly. His mother was, and is, a special woman who deserves our prayers and God's comfort. Since the funeral, I can't seem to look at a happy child, boy or girl, without being afraid for them. Before age 15 half of them will experience their families being TORN apart by divorce or abandonment the other half will hardly notice as their families slowly DRIFT apart. The worse of the two is likely the drifting as it is gradual and everyone can pretend that all is well. In both cases the solution is RECONNECTING with our children

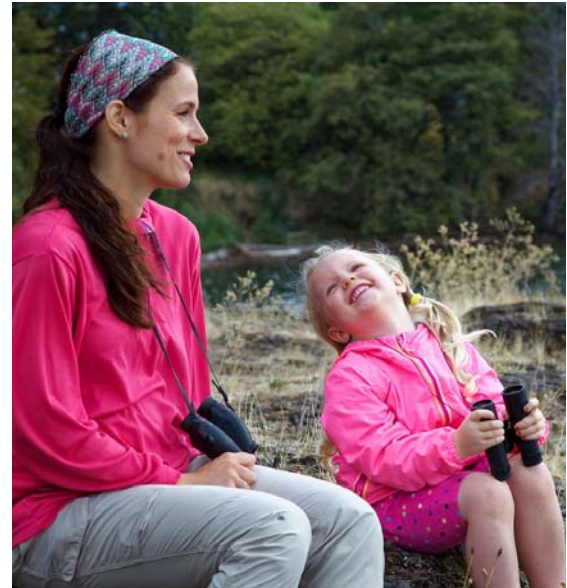
Children NEED a set time each day when they KNOW they will get a little one on one time with at least one

parent. Whether the problem is having your family torn apart or simply DRIFTING apart I pray that the following list of "Parent Child Dates" helps all parents stay in touch with their little ones. No one should know the sadness of losing one. When these parent child dates are shared with love, they improve your children's chances to recover from divorce, escape poverty, stay out of jail, live longer and share their joy with others. (That guarantee is from God, but also a growing list of leading universities and child advocacy organizations, some of which are listed at the end of this article.)

Our foolproof Daily Date is Bonding/Rebonding in the kitchen. According to Dr. Margaret Mead and other leading anthropologists the ONE THING that marks a person as part of a tribal or family unit is whether they help prepare the food or not. She further affirms that a modern day child who helps prepare a meal has a sense of belonging, of being a valued part of the family group...of being a CONTRIBUTOR.

The secret ingredient for parents of young children is the banana. Even three year olds can slice a banana with a serrated plastic knife. Once the banana is sliced and put in bowls it can be turned into a classy dessert by adding: sprinkles, a little honey, melted peanut butter, chocolate chips, ice cream, strawberry jam, pancake syrup, coconut flakes, mayonnaise, chopped nuts etc. etc. etc. Encourage your child to be an adventurer...to enjoy preparing his or her very own and very special family dessert.

Preparing food together has held families together for thousands of years and if mixed with love and patience will help your family stay together. In the case of divorce it is a way of REBONDING, reforging damaged relations. In the case of remarriage it is a great way for step parents and children to BEGIN a new relationship. The key is being together with a shared goal. A child who can cut and pour can prepare anything. So important is preparing and sharing meals that it is spotlighted in both Old and New Testaments and a major foundation of



FELLOWSHIP.

There is no easier time to RECCONNECT with our children. We all must eat!!!

Daily Date #2 sharing a Bible verse. The child of divorce loses four to ten years off his or her lifespan, four years for girls, ten years for boys. The number one and two resiliency factors for restoring these children to a normal lifespan are regular church attendance and deep personal faith. According to scripture itself God's Word will actually restore a child to a normal life expectancy. But there's a catch. You have to make it short and sweet. One of the shortest, sweetest ways I know of is to get a little deck of Scripture cards, and have each child read one with the evening meal. Putting them in a bowl by the front

door and having each family member take one on leaving the house works equally well. Our group maintains a Web site that has full pages of Scripture cutups for those who can't get to a Christian bookstore. Just run off a sheet or two and cut them up. If we care about our children, we have to share Scripture with them, and we have to do it every day even if just for *one minute*. It is God's command taken from Deuteronomy 11:20, 21: "And you shall write them upon the door posts of your house, and upon your gates: that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children." It is not always convenient, but sharing a daily Bible verse certainly beats going to a child's funeral or visiting them in jail.

Daily Date #3 day walking together. This is the way God describes the perfect relationship. He walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden. He also walked with Enoch, and their relationship was so close that Enoch "went home with the Lord" without tasting death. There is something wholesome about walking. You can look up, or down, or all around. You can say something or nothing. You can hold hands or not, but the unspoken contract is that you are together . . . and you are sharing God's world, His trees and His clouds with your children,

Walking with two or three children is very fine, and we all should do it. Sometimes, though, a private walk hand in hand can be even more special. It may be the one thing your child remembers all his life . . . the feel of his hand in yours. The added blessing is that you are outside in God's world. You can identify trees, capture bugs, collect leaves, or look at the stars. You can walk backward or blindfolded, speedwalk or moon walk...however you walk let it be a time to RECONNECT with your children.

Daily or weekly Date #1: "Whistle While You Work." Just five minutes a day of working together can almost guarantee that your child will never spend a day of his life in jail. The study took 40 years to finish and was conducted by Harvard University, with the results spotlighted in *Reader's Digest* over 25 years ago. Nothing else seemed to be significant, not poverty or marital status, not family problems, addiction or neighborhood. If a child learned to enjoy work as a child and share it with others, he or she just did not end up in jail. It is important that children always have something to do that is fun for them. It is easiest to start when they are 4 or 5, but these guidelines are good for whatever age you begin: Set the timer on the stove for five minutes, turn on the music, and whistle (at least, figuratively) till the buzzer goes off. All the child needs to know to be able to work along

with us is where things belong and that we enjoy working with him. The key to having a memorable five minutes is more in how you "whistle" than in how you work.

Daily date #4: laugh a day. Laughter is a great family habit. Our number one choice is hide and seek where you tickle any child you find. Our number two choice is funny hats or masks, pretending to be someone you are not. Number three is funny books. Ask your librarian for something age appropriate and use a special voice for each character. Other laugh starters might be, water pistols, learning to make funny sounds, knock knock jokes or a joke book, funny faces...in short anything out of the ordinary: perhaps suddenly freezing in the middle of a normal activity, or talking so fast or slow that no one can understand. My own personal favorite is a game called body to body. Split the whole family into pairs. The one person calls out two body parts, nose to elbow and you have to act it out, forehead to forehead, foot to foot, eyeball to eyeball and on and on.

Weekly/monthly Date, exchanging forgiveness. I have never met a parent who never made mistakes but I have met thousands who never admit them, at least not to their children. One way to start a new habit of asking forgiveness is to set a time, once a week, and ask your children to forgive you for any harsh words you may have spoken or for the times you thought only of yourself. Then ask them if there is anything they are sorry for, something they should ask you to forgive them? Asking forgiveness is not taking the blame for the past. It is clearing the way for the future.

After you forgive each other have ice cream. Make it a weekly tradition. If a child does not want to forgive don't force the issue. Give him time and if necessary suggest he talk with a pastor or salvation army officer. The single greatest danger to most children is their own anger. Asking forgiveness is a first class tradition.

Weekly Date #2 learning to read is an experience no parent should miss. My own favorites especially for beginning or slow readers are the "Hear Me Read" books by Dr. Mary Manz Simon. Each book is a complete Bible Story told in just 19 vocabulary words. The level two books have more vocabulary words for older children. Most public libraries carry these books. If yours does not they can get them on inter library loan OR, at your request, purchase some of their own. There are MANY MANY other great books that will help you spend TIME with your child.

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The excruciating pain of losing a **child** can be sudden and devastating, but most often it is slow and painful, a gradual slide from preschool to the streets. It is a daily struggle for parents to protect their children from the danger filled world we all must live in. Putting up a strong fight means giving them something to do, learning a Bible verse, saying a prayer, taking a walk, and receiving all the love you can give. It can be hard, very hard, to do these things every day, but do them we must! After just one month we will find out that life is better, that God has reached down and taken the things that were wearing you down in your heart and troubling your mind. Dates are great for *kids* but may be even better for parents. Try one. Try two. I'm convinced you'll like it. I hope no one who knew the child whose funeral I attended ever forgets him ... or the others who will be like him if we don't make RECONNECTING with our children a daily habit.

Author's Note: The research mentioned in this article is part of a growing emphasis on protective or resiliency factors, things we can add to the lives of children at risk, to neutralize or reverse the risks of

divorce, poverty, a parent in prison, or family addictions. Prominent among the researchers were Harvard University, the National 4-H Council, the NIHR (National Institute for Health Research), the University of Wisconsin, the University of Kansas, Loyola University, and the Gallup Poll. I am grateful to all of them for realizing the value of faith, of prayer and of love. The Web site with the free Scripture cutups mentioned in the article is www.bibleparent.com. Everything on the site is free.

Charles White is a retired Christian preschool teacher and lifelong volunteer at his local Salvation Army. He prays that this article is used by many as a tool to reach those who do not have a daily walk with Christ.