

Remaining Close to Your Child When You Have No Time by David J. Palmiter, Jr., Ph.D., ABPP

We seem to be running and gunning more with each year that goes by. For instance, research suggests that more meals are shared in minivans than around kitchen tables and that the average American father spends nine minutes one-on-one each week with his teenage child. The exercise reviewed in this article, called “special time”, is designed to increase the odds that you will remain close to your child, and that he or she will feel valued by you, even though your life may feel like a grenade range.

The technique sounds simple to do but it is not. Special time involves spending one hour a week, one-on-one, doing *nothing* but (1) attending to, (2) praising and (3) expressing positive emotion towards your child. You can do special time in one of two ways. First you can wait until your child is doing some activity that you can praise her for (e.g., drawing, shooting baskets, playing a video game, etc.). Then saddle up next to her, watch what she is doing, praise that which you believe is praise-worthy and express positive feelings that you are having. If your child is watching TV, and this is the only time you can do special time, have someone else turn the TV off 30 minutes before you wish to start special time. Your child is unlikely to just sit there but will start to do something that is more likely to be special time compatible. The second method is just to tell your child that you’d like to spend some special time with him, as he matters so much to you and you love him so; then ask him what he’d like to do that you can watch.

If you had a video-tape of a parent doing special time well, only three verbs, and their synonyms, would describe that parent’s behavior: attending, praising and emoting. If you are doing special time well, you ought to be able to have your hands in your pockets, except to maybe rub your child’s back or tussle his hair. Special time is different from quality time. Quality time is a great thing. If there was more of it there would be fewer prisons. But, when I’m sharing quality time with one of my children something else besides my child is capturing my attention. If I go to a ballgame with my son I am giving him attention, yes, but I am also giving the game and our surroundings attention too. On the other hand, when I watch him, as a master-Jedi, battling the dark side of the force, and comment on his skill with a light saber, I’m doing special time. Quality time is 70%; special time is 100% attention.

During special time, avoid teaching, inquiring, sharing alternative perspectives, correcting, or moralizing. All of these are valuable parenting verbs, but they can be done during the other 99.5% of the week. Special time is just for attending, praising and emoting. “I like your choice of color for that tree. Great shot! I could never advance through those levels so quickly, very good. I love spending time

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alone with you. Your speed on those skates is remarkable. Have I told you lately that no one matters more to me than you?” Start out trying to find something legitimate to affirm or praise every minute or so; you’ll find the right dosing of praise, that works for your child, with practice.

For older children it may be harder to do special time while they’re doing an activity. Instead, special time may be more likely to be done during a conversation, but a very different type of conversation. During this conversation, you would only be listening and pointing out only that which you value, appreciate or admire: “I never looked at it that way. You have a creative mind. That’s one of the things that I most admire about you, your loyalty to your friends. I have a lot of respect for how hard you handled yourself to that situation.” If you hear things you don’t like, bite your tongue and wait until you hear something you can value and endorse. You can offer alternative perspectives, teach, moralize, direct, etc. during the other 112 some odd hours of waking time during the week. So, doing special time during a conversation is akin to being an effective in-law: you say what you like and be quiet about the rest!

If you really want to hit the ground running, aim to do 20 minutes of special time each day with each child for the first week. After that, set a target of at least one hour each week with each child; this can be done all at once (how I do it), or you can break it up into segments (i.e., three 20 minute periods or two 30 minute periods). I refer to this hour as the minimal, weekly attentional requirement for any healthy parent-child relationship.

Imagine what it would be like to have someone, whose opinion you value, watch what you do for an hour and tell you, with sincerity, what he values about your performance. “You know it was hard for you to get up today. You were up late ironing our kids’ clothes after a long day of putting them first. Not only did you get up without complaint, but you also maintained your patience throughout a trying morning and kept your focus on our son’s needs. Have I told you lately how outstanding of a mother you are?” Imagine one hour of that a week. For most adults this would be like a crackling, warm fire on a chilly winter’s night. For kids it is incredibly powerful. Once you see the effect on your child you will be sold on the power of special time.

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