

CREATIVE WAYS TO HAVE FUN WITH YOUR SPOUSE



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CREATIVE WAYS TO HAVE FUN

WITH YOUR SPOUSE

In a fast-paced world, couples have multiple priorities: children, home, careers, volunteering, extended family, social obligations, perhaps continuing education or community service. These are all virtuous, important, and necessary things, of course. You and your spouse are committed and involved, as it should be.

A good marriage is a source of strength for both partners, and the underlying reason for many of your shared commitments. Think of your marriage as a journey that you and your spouse decided to take together. Every aspect of your life is a stop along the way. As with any long trip, the two of you may choose to visit different attractions. Perhaps one partner is finishing a degree while the other supports the family; one is devoted to a worthy cause while the other focuses on the home. At the end of the day, though, you return to each other to be refreshed and renewed.

Think back to the early days of your relationship. Falling in love seems to be an entirely separate state of being for most of us. The growing intimacy between you served as a buffer against the stressors and annoyances beyond the refuge of each other. Being in your partner's embrace was a balm that eased any hurt, an unparalleled peace that infused you. The mention of your beloved's name was enough to bring a smile to your face under any circumstances.

In an ideal world, nurturing and enjoying each other would be a given for long-married partners. Many couples find it difficult to carve out that time on a regular basis, though, and if you're among them, it's time to get creative! This report offers a diverse range of ideas for busy moms and dads to stay connected in spite of time or budget constraints, hectic schedules, and other obstacles.



THE IMPORTANCE OF STAYING CONNECTED

Good marriages don't simply happen. Perhaps you and your spouse are one of the fortunate couples who knew this from the beginning. Most of us enter relationships with the best intentions, but get side-tracked by the demands of home, children, careers, and other priorities. Don't despair, though! It's never too late to re-think the route this journey will follow. The first step is recommitting to the time and effort required to build and maintain a solid union.

We're talking about a crucial part of any relationship: intimacy. It has nothing to do with the physical connection between partners. Rather, it is the bond that holds you together. Intimacy develops over time, and the everyday moments are its substance.

Building intimacy is easy when a relationship is new. We revel in the joy of getting to know each other on a deeper level. We look forward to sharing the triumphs and disappointments of the day, celebrating each other's victories and consoling each other in defeat. We feel no threat in being vulnerable and truly known to another human being while we're falling in love. Just the opposite, in fact. We crave the growing familiarity and connection.

To illustrate this point, think about the difference between roommates and marriage partners. Two people can share living space and expenses, exist in the same place for a large amount of time, and know a great deal about each other's habits and preferences. What do married couples have that sets them apart? Shared goals. Deep concern for the well-being of the other. A willingness to act for the benefit of the other. A desire to know their partner's thoughts and feelings and to share their own. There is a certain vulnerability involved, efforts made and actions taken, that let each partner know they are valued above all others.

Intimacy is the glue that holds spouses together. It is the clear stream that quenches your thirst for connection on the journey. It is the fuel that keeps each of you moving forward together, even when you're apart, even when life throws unforeseeable roadblocks in your path. It is the difference between being traveling companions, or just ships that pass in the night. And it is well worth the time and effort required to sustain it.



HOW TO MAINTAIN HEALTHY EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

Psychiatrist Erik Erikson, who studied under and worked with Freud, believed we develop the ability to be intimate during young adulthood. From 19 to 34, the focus of emotional life is on relationships. We learn how to be open and connected with another person, while still remaining a separate, independent self.

Intimacy comes from sharing openly. You share your thoughts and feelings, let each other see what's really inside, unhidden by the façade you show the rest of the world. In small steps, you build each other's trust. When you feel safe with someone, it's easy to be yourself with them, and the connection deepens.

Over time, the interactions between you become the substance of your bond, so the critical elements in building intimacy are the willingness to open up, and the shared history between you. These are the same ingredients needed to maintain that intimate connections.

Interestingly, Erikson believed that in order to be truly intimate with another person, you had to be as comfortable being alone. He said there is a necessary balance between togetherness and separateness; too much of either extreme has detrimental effects on the relationship as well as the individuals. Each person must be self-aware and strong separately in order to have the confidence required to open up and connect with another.

It may seem counterintuitive, but Erikson's theory makes is clear. An important step in maintaining a healthy intimacy with your partner is to maintain a stronger sense of self. Given this, a report on staying connected with your partner would not be complete without a section on self-care.



BRINGING YOUR BEST SELF TO THE PARTY

Your partner didn't fall in love with an illusion; it was the real you that held such appeal. Many of us begin to lose ourselves in relationships without even realizing it's happened, simply because we immerse ourselves in the needs of the other, the children, the shared life. Before you start planning those special nights with your partner, take some time to reconnect with the person you used to be. Here are some easy ways to nurture and develop your own inner life, a step that will make you a happier, more complete person. Then, enriched and renewed, you will be better prepared to enrich your relationship.

- Cherish friendships. If we're fortunate, one or two friendships may last a lifetime. But the benefits of connecting aren't limited to proven, long-term friendships. Casual social interaction has been shown to improve mood, reduce stress, relieve depression, and boost immunity. A quick lunch, periodic phone calls, or perhaps even an occasional outing will go along way toward strengthening your inner resources.
- Develop your own interests. Staying involved in things you enjoy or feel strongly about is good for your relationship. It keeps your mind sharp, your creativity engaged, and adds a richer dimension to your separate life as well as your time together.
- Take a break. It's so tempting, given the impossibly long lists of things to do that most of us face each day, to keep pushing forward no matter what. But research shows that this approach creates stress, which has been correlated with disease, weight gain, depression, and marital discord. Taking care of yourself is not at all selfish. In fact, it's vital. You are a better partner when you are healthy and content.

- Have a purpose. If you had to explain what your life was all about, would you do so by listing your functions – partner, parent, business person, soccer coach, Sunday school teacher, etc. – or do you really know what your purpose is in life? People who feel a sense of meaning in what they do fare better across the board than others. Purpose, for some, comes from their faith life. For others, it is based on a deep conviction or desire to make a positive contribution to the future, or a gift they feel compelled to share. Your purpose is part of who you are, at the most profound level. Knowing yourself is a prerequisite for true intimacy.

- Allow time to reflect. Have you ever known someone whose entire existence seems to be about putting out fires? They run from one emergency to the next, never having time to plan ahead. If we're not thinking through what we want in life and acting from that knowledge, one busy day just flows into the next. We have no control over the direction or quality of our lives and relationships. Give yourself time to reflect and plan so your interactions with your partner are meaningful and move you both closer to the future you desire.

Now that you're refreshed, brimming with self-knowledge and new experiences to share, it's time to bring your best self to the party! Even the busiest parents can find ways to stay connected. Here are some creative, fun date ideas for couples to try and to build on.

DATES ON A SHOESTRING

Fun doesn't have to mean "expensive". Sure, it might limit some of the extravagant options, but there's a whole world out there to explore. Creative brainstorming with your mate, a little resourcefulness, and the right attitude are all it takes to have fun on a shoestring! Consider some of the following ideas, and be sure to see the section titled "Creative Solutions to Common Obstacles" for more money-saving tips.

- Picnic at the park. Pack a tasty lunch and a bottle of wine if you'd like, and enjoy a lazy afternoon embraced by nature. Remember to bring a blanket, and keep the meal simple to avoid having to carry a lot of gear. (Don't forget the corkscrew, though!) If you picnic at a local forest preserve, you can enjoy hiking afterwards.

This is a wonderful way to spend a hour or two along with your partner, but it also doubles as a family function if necessary. Choose a location that offers both natural beauty as well as playground equipment. After lunch, enjoy adult conversation with your spouse while the kids play. It also works well for parents of infants, who don't yet feel comfortable leaving the baby in another's care.

- All-season star gazing – Stardate.org is a terrific website for non-technical people with an interest in heavenly events like moon phases, asteroid showers, planet visibility, and seasonal constellations. Visit the website or subscribe to the newsletter for up-to-date information on interesting phenomena.

Drive to the best viewing location in your area. You can watch the sky show from the warmth of the car, or bring a blanket in mild weather and lay beneath the stars. A thermos of hot chocolate and a snack will add to the fun. Laying side-by-side beneath the cosmos has a way of putting things in perspective, and the peace that permeates the sleeping world, accompanied by late-night sounds of crickets and the rustling wind, create a relaxing, romantic environment for the two of you to simply enjoy.

Since most astral events don't occur when it's convenient (or possible) to find a baby-sitter, some couples use this date idea with their children in tow. Little ones will likely fall asleep during the car ride to your viewing location, making it another way for the two of you to "be alone" even if you're not.

- Get cultured. Museums of every type exist for those who want to develop or expand their appreciation of the world at large. Some examples include art, science, and history museums, and sports and music halls of fame. Planetariums and aquariums are also a great place to get more familiar with each other's passions. Many charge no admission or a nominal fee. Share each other's interest in a specific area, or explore something new together.

Find facilities in your area in several ways. Local phone books list community attractions as well as those in nearby urban centers. Online, you can Google your city along with the word "museum" or "attractions". A phone call to your community's public relations liaison, chamber of commerce, or MainStreet organization also will yield useful information.

- Open mic night. A popular event at many night clubs and coffee houses is the weekly open mic, where a variety of local musicians sign up and perform for free. Usually with no cover charge or a very nominal one, this provides a night of entertainment for the cost of a cup of coffee.

While simply watching the show can be fun, how much more romantic if one of you performed! Or better yet, the two of you could prepare a duet appropriate to the venue. Don't worry too much about being an amateur if you've never performed before. While some open mic events are specifically intended for up-and-coming musicians to gain an audience, many boast a wide range of talent and newcomers are welcomed. Call ahead to find a venue that would be comfortable for your skill level.

- **Make a difference together.** Do you and your spouse share a passion for ending hunger or saving the planet? Volunteer your time as a team to help your favorite cause or charity. This is an excellent way to share your respective purposes and support each other's values.

There are more worthy causes out there than there are people to help. If neither of you presently supports a cause you believe in, finding one that is meaningful to you both can bring you closer. Enjoy the satisfaction of making a difference while deepening your bond.

- **Get lectured.** If you're like most busy parents, neither of you has enough time to explore all the things that interest you. Why not make a date of learning together? It's easy to find a lecture or demonstration on almost any topic. They are hosted by libraries, schools, community organizations, businesses, and individuals who want to share their avocation with others. Local papers often run a calendar of events for the coming week, so this is a good place to start. Find one that holds interest for you both, or take turns selecting topics and make the lecture date a regular event.

- **Community events.** Many communities host a variety of events year-round, including art fairs, house and garden walks, festivals, farmers' markets, rummage sales, concerts, and craft shows. Find

your community's website, or put your name on their mailing list, to stay current on upcoming free events.

- Backyard camp-out. Nothing is more relaxing for some couples than getting away from it all. You don't have to wait for that long-planned vacation to escape together, though. Plan a camp-out in the backyard. Raise the tent, build a fire, and relax away from phones, televisions, and all your day-to-day distractions.

To make it more authentic, pack your food and beverages for the night (or weekend) in appropriate coolers and storage containers. Have a ready supply of firewood, because no camp-out is complete without the heady smell of wood smoke. Enjoy the sounds of the night and the dance of the bonfire, then snuggle up together in a sleeping bag. There's an added bonus, too. Unlike the real thing, this pseudo-camp-out does not require the use of an outhouse or public shower!



STOLEN MOMENTS

Some situations require greater creativity than others. Parents of very young children, and those with large families or two careers fall into this category. If you wait for a convenient time to plan a night out, your dates are probably few and far between.

But fun dates don't have to be elaborate and time-consuming. Remember, intimacy grows from the shared experiences between you and your partner. Frequent, brief moments will go far in keeping you connected. Make the most of every opportunity.

- **Pillow talk.** When the day is finally over and the kids are fast asleep, set aside a half hour for the two of you. Before you climb into bed, light a few candles, share a special treat, and enjoy uninterrupted conversation and each other's company.

This special time can be an oasis for both of you, free of the demands and stresses of the day. Agree in advance that this is an anxiety-free zone! Discussions about work, child-rearing issues, home repair, finances, and any topic that is stressful for either of you are not allowed. Humorous stories, events you both look forward to, planning future date nights, daydreaming together, and an unlimited number of expressions of endearment are highly encouraged.

- **Trade massages.** Stiff, achy muscles are a common complaint among busy, hard-working people. Take turns massaging each other's tension away. Human contact has a healing emotional effect; you'll be nurturing each other's spirits as you work away the physical distress.

If time and your energy levels allow, apply a hot, moist compress before beginning the massage. Be sure to use a lotion – either medicinal or otherwise – to prevent the skin discomfort caused by friction. Ordinary moisturizer works well, too.

Shoulders, back, and feet are most commonly affected. After even a brief massage, muscles relax and leave the recipient feeling refreshed. It's a beautiful gesture to give each other the gift of comfort.

- Prepare a meal together. Dinner happens every night. Why not make it an opportunity to have fun together? Allow the kids an hour of public television or a video while you and your spouse prepare the evening meal.

Make it special by creating the right environment. Have fresh cut flowers on the windowsill. Major grocery stores often sell bunches at a very low cost. Candles flickering on the counter infuse the room with calm and warmth. Play music that you both enjoy in the background. It's all in the ambience!

You might want to try experimenting with a new recipe, or one that has been handed down through the generations. But even if the evening's entrée is macaroni and cheese with hot dogs, the act of preparing it together in the refuge you've created will make it special.

- Errand boy and girl. Buying supplies for the week seems like a chore when time is tight. Most of us dread the weekly – or more frequent – trips to the bank, the supermarket, the pharmacy, the hardware store, etc. The two of you can make it fun by taking the drudgery out of it. Plan a lunch stop as part of the trip, visiting a new café or sandwich shop you've been waiting to try. Make time for an

extra stop to shop for something you'll both enjoy, such as a new movie or CD, a comfort item for your home, or the ingredients for a special dinner. Stop to listen to a sidewalk performer, enjoy the sights and sounds of the community, and appreciate the gift of each other's company along the way.



RECAPTURE THE ROMANCE

Remember the thrill when you first fell in love? Hearing your spouse's voice on the phone would send tingles up your spine. When you embraced, all was well with your word. And when the two of you daydreamed about your future together, it seemed anything was possible.

The wonderful, heady feeling of being in love is part physiology, part psychology, and total bliss. While it is no substitute for the more mature, long-term love that follows, it is certainly a great beginning, and great place to revisit at any point in a marriage. Here are some ideas for bringing back the thrill of those early days, and cultivating it in the present.

- Indulge the senses. Sensuality isn't just about sex. It is a romantic experience in its own right, one that the human body is designed to experience.

Ever wonder why we associate things like red roses, candlelight and moonlight, wine and chocolate, and silky fabrics with romance? It is because the senses are a gateway to our emotions. They are also a short-cut to long-forgotten memories and experiences that we associate with them.

Plan an evening of sensuous pleasure, making sure there is an element to entice each of the sense. Prepare foods and beverages that appeal to both eye and palate. Play music that soothes you. Enjoy candlelight, roses, and chocolate – they are more than just a cliché! Pamper yourself and your spouse with physical comfort – warm baths, scented lotions, the fresh smell of clean linen.

And don't forget the delicious sensation of falling asleep in each other's arms. Too often, busy couples find themselves on different schedules. After an evening of pleasing the senses, make it a point to surrender to the haven of slumber together.

- Have a Barry Manilow night – or whatever music the two of you enjoyed while dating. The idea is to recreate that period in time, and music is a powerful facilitator. There are two ways to do it. One is to go to a concert by this artist and enjoy reminiscing about your shared history. On a budget (or in the event that the artist is no longer performing), you can play CDs or watch a concert on DVD. To expand on the theme, wear your favorite outfits that are reminiscent of that era. Prepare foods that you both indulged in. Bring out your photo album or saved love letters, and revel in the memories of the “good old days”.

- The ultimate ride. Take a ride in a horse-drawn carriage. Obviously, outdoor activities are more comfortable in mild weather. But it can be quite romantic to bundle up together under a blanket twhile the moonlight twinkles on freshly fallen snow.

A variation on this theme might be to go on a hay ride. These are especially popular during the fall. The earthy smells and the brisk wind on your faces are exhilarating. On a crisp, sunny day, or under the harvest moon, it's both fun and romantic.

- Take a walk. What is more romantic than seeing a couple out for a stroll, holding hands in companionable silence? Such a simple pleasure can easily become a habit, and a regular opportunity to share thoughts about your day when the two of you reunite each evening.

Togetherness and shared ritual are the obvious benefits. In addition, walking is highly recommended as a form of exercise for people of all ages, in any physical condition. (Of course, always consult your health care professional if you have any concerns about your well-being.) Walking has been shown to lower blood pressure, reduce symptoms of stress, relieve anxiety and depression, improve circulation and digestion, promote sound sleep, and increase mental acuity.



DREAM THE FUTURE

Relationships evolve, just as individuals do, with age and experience. You're still the same people you were in the beginning, but your experiences have shaped you, focused your direction, and created a new depth and richness that isn't possible in youth. Part of maintaining a strong partnership is making sure you grow as a couple, as well as individuals, by having shared dreams and goals. Creative dates can center around nurturing those dreams and building your future together.

Following are some ideas you can develop to help you and your partner envision your future more clearly.

- Go virtual house-hunting. Unless you're already in your dream home or living on cherished family land, chances are good that you'll want to trade up at some point in the future. What kind of house do you hope to own in 10 years? In 20?

Think about architectural style, number of rooms, conveniences, décor, landscaping, and the type of community your ideal home will be located in. Have you both yearned to live in a more rural area, or do you crave the energy and accessibility of the city? Do you love old farmhouses, Frank Lloyd Wright designs, or casual suburban ranches? Let your imagination soar as you create this mutual vision.

Real estate agents now have videos of some properties available for viewing online. Spend an afternoon talking about all the characteristics and amenities your dream home will have, then scan newspaper ads and websites to explore houses that meet that ideal. Keep a file of properties on the market that meet your requirements.

Consider learning more about housing trends and mortgage products, too. For now, you'll make the dream more tangible by taking real-world steps to make it happen. Long-term, you'll be much better prepared to take advantage of the right opportunity when the time comes.

Revisit your file and the real estate websites often and encourage each other to keep the dream alive.

- Plan your second honeymoon – Assume you will be able to take the trip of a lifetime to mark a future anniversary. Where will you go? It could be a return trip to your original honeymoon spot, or a place you've always longed to visit, or even an exotic, distant location that the two of you can explore together.

Once you've picked a destination, visit a travel agent together for brochures. Spend an afternoon at the library reading books on your honeymoon spot. Learn the native language together. Experiment with foods that originated there, perhaps having a monthly "Tahiti Night" or East Asian Preview. Follow the cultural trends of the area and stay current on news. By the time you actually get there, it will be as much a familiar part of your relationship as it is an exciting adventure.

- Develop a common interest. Couples with a shared hobby have a built-in fun activity. Perhaps one of you already has an avocation that the other can become involved in, such as gardening, home-brewing, ham radio, or blogging. The veteran of the hobby will serve as mentor to the other partner, explaining the ins and outs and easing the "newbie" into his or her world.

Perhaps you'd like to explore something entirely new to both of you. Make a list of all the topics under the sun that interest each of you. Choose one to start, and develop a course of action. You might take a class together, or sit in on club meetings relevant to your interest, for example. If supplies or equipment are involved, enjoy an afternoon selecting your wares together. Put aside a regular time when you'll both indulge in your new interest together.



COMMON DELIGHTS

Some of the most common pastimes make great fun dates! They require little planning and can be embarked upon spontaneously. Next time you find yourself with a few unexpected hours, consider some of the following ideas.

- Dig out your bowling shoes. Bowling is still relatively inexpensive and many facilities are comfortable, contemporary, and ideal for a few hours of entertainment. The game takes some skill, but it's fun at any level. For variety, try candlelight bowling if it's available in your area. If keeping the ball in the lane is a challenge, bumper bowling can keep it fun. Inflatable tubes are placed in the gutters, forcing the ball to continue toward the pins.
- Have a treasure hunt. Formerly the domain of women, garage sales have become popular among couples in recent years. Window shoppers are never discouraged, and nothing beats the thrill of finding just the right piece of décor that you've both been searching for, or unearthing an old novel that you both loved years ago. In some communities, you only have to follow the signs posted on street corners to find the sales. Local newspapers include a category in their classified section, where you can find the location of current sales as well as a description of the type of merchandise being offered.

Garage sales are a seasonal affair, generally held from mid-spring through mid-autumn. Treasure hunters can continue this pastime during the off-season by exploring local flea markets. These are usually held on a regular schedule (for example, every Saturday, or the first Sunday of every month) in a designated location, and are publicized locally. Alternatively, visit the website at

fleamarketguide.com. The site shows flea markets by state, and all 50 states are listed.

Thrift stores and resale shops have cropped up across the country, offering gentle used – and sometimes unusual – items. Look through clothing, articles for the home, electronics, tools and appliances, and a host of other essentials and oddities. Treasure hunting can be practical or whimsical, depending on your intentions. Either way, it's an interesting way to embark on an adventure together. Often, you never know what you'll find!

- Become workout buddies. Everyone knows that having a workout partner improves your performance. You're held accountable, and more importantly, you have a built in cheering squad to motivate you toward your goals.

If you and your spouse enjoy working out, why not make it a shared passion? Find a gym that suits both your preferences. Set your individual fitness goals, and decide how each of you can best support the other. There are several aspects of shared exercise that are appealing to couples.

First, you're building a healthier, happier future together. Secondly, the endorphins produced through exercise create a sense of well-being and contentment, so it makes sense to share that experience together. And finally, sculpting your physical self is empowering in a way that generalizes to other parts of life. If the two of you together master your appearance and make a positive impact on your health, it follows that changing other aspects of your shared life is not only possible, it's probable.

GREAT ESCAPES

Once in awhile, every couple needs to do something out of the ordinary. Month-long trips to Europe may be out of the question for busy parents, but exciting (albeit shorter) getaways are still possible.

- Weekend excursions. Romantic, restful, exciting weekend trips are available to satisfy the preferences of every couple. Try a secluded bed and breakfast in the country, a brief riverboat cruise with overnight accommodations, a golf weekend at a nearby resort, or a hotel stay in an area that features attractions that interest you both.
- Indulge an interest – Rent a sailboat for the day. Spend the weekend horseback riding. Plan a daylong hike or bicycle tour. Get tickets for the theatre or concert and spend the night in the city afterwards. Attend a professional tennis or golf tournament.
- College reunion. Don't wait for the reunion committee to contact you. Get in touch with mutual friends from college (or from your early dating days) and organize a get-together. Plan the trip around a location that holds fond memories for you. In addition to sight-seeing and reminiscing with friends, be sure to build in alone time for the two of you. It's an opportunity to rekindle some of the early passion.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO COMMON OBSTACLES

Keep in mind that every obstacle can be resolved when you think outside the box, and finding creative solutions can be fun if you approach it that way. Here are some ideas for overcoming common obstacles to having alone time with one's spouse.



SO MANY TASKS, SO LITTLE TIME

Lack of time is probably the greatest obstacle most couples face, and there are a lot of creative ways to make time.

First, identify what keeps you from having the time together that you crave. Review your daily calendar for clues. Do one of you have an unpredictable work schedule? Are you the local “go-to” person in your neighborhood or at your child’s school, always being asked to help out with another project? Have your children’s activity schedules turned you into a full-time chauffeur? Identify the most time-intensive areas of life for both you and your spouse, then see if some of the following suggestions can be adapted to your situation.

- **Conflicting work schedules.** If you and your spouse work different shifts, or if one or both of you are prone to unpredictable overtime, planning becomes difficult. Think beyond the usual Friday or Saturday evening timeframe for time alone. Is there a day both of you usually have off from work? Or a time of day when you both can be free? Watching the sun rise over breakfast can be as romantic as watching it set after dinner. An afternoon rendezvous could be fun and adventurous as well. Let go of social convention and create new ways for you and your spouse to be together.
- **Too many commitments.** Some of us have an endless “to-do” list. If one of you is over-committed, look for ways to reduce the list. Try delegating committee work, or focusing your time on the volunteer projects that matter most to you.

Creative scheduling may help, too. Perhaps one of you can reschedule evening or weekend commitments to a time when your spouse also has an obligation. It will take some team work to coordinate your respective engagements, so plan to sit down together, get comfortable, and pull out your PDAs to make it work!

- **Managing children's activities.** If your child is very active in extra-curricular programs, or if you have more than one child enrolled in activities, it can sometimes feel as if you are more chauffeur than parent! But you don't have to do it alone – all the other parents would probably welcome a system that gives them a break, too.

Set up a car pool with the parents of one or more children in the same activity, rotating transportation duties. Or use the time between trips to your advantage – you and your spouse can drop off the children, then spend the time talking, enjoying a walk together, having a cup of coffee, or listening to music.

- **Re-evaluate household responsibilities.** Sometimes, one partner gradually takes on more and more of the tasks that need to be done on a daily basis around the home. It may begin as a way to balance the other partner's heavy work schedule or for some other relevant reason, but over time, circumstances change but habits do not. Take a look at the division of labor, and see if one of you can take over a few tasks. Nothing takes away the desire to have fun – even with the one you love most in the whole world – than being exhausted at the end of the day. Helping your partner, and vice versa, can ultimately help you both.

BABYSITTER BLUES

Those years pass so quickly in retrospect, but when you are raising young children, it sometimes feels as if you've been doing it forever! Good parents often feel uncomfortable with the thought of leaving their children with a babysitter, or have difficulty finding good caregivers at an affordable price. Here are some tips and creative solutions for these issues.

- **Go to the source.** Many local hospitals and park districts host Red Cross babysitter training. Participants must meet certain age requirements in order to enroll. They receive training in all the basics of childcare, including CPR, and receive a certificate at the completion of the course to document their qualifications. Find an organization that hosts this training, or contact your local Red Cross, to find out their procedures for obtaining referrals. You'll have the assurance of knowing your children are in good hands while you're away.
- **Mom's Day Out programs.** Popular through many churches and park districts, these community programs host group activities for children in their facilities. Parents can sign their children up for the event, giving them several hours to use as they wish.
- **Church members.** A great place to find potential babysitters is within your congregation. Some churches allow available babysitters to post contact information outside the nursery. You can also ask the church secretary or the teen ministry director for referrals. Let other members know you're looking for a reliable teen, too. Finding a sitter with like values will give you added peace of mind.

- Referrals from friends. Word-of-mouth is still the best form of advertising, and a very dependable way to learn about potential sitters. Ask parents of same-age children for recommendations. This will also serve as a pre-screening process; other parents will be quick to let you know of any problems they've had with certain babysitters, so you will know whom to avoid.



WE HAVE MORE TIME THAN MONEY

We're all on a budget, and there are times throughout life when certain priorities take precedence over others. That doesn't have to rule out fun dates with your spouse, though! There are a lot of ways to have fun on a budget. Try some of these suggestions.

- Discount coupons. Local and national restaurants are always looking for ways to bring in new customers, and offering discounts is a popular way to do it. Watch your local paper for inserts and advertisements offering two-for-one deals. Direct mail is another way to find coupons and special offers.
- Entertainment '08 books. Sold online as well as by many community groups as a fundraiser, Entertainment books offer coupons for restaurants and attractions in your area. Visit the website at <http://www.entertainment.com> to learn more or to order your own copy.
- Start a babysitting co-op. Childcare can be expensive, making it difficult for parents on a budget to go out alone. One way to reduce this expense is to start a babysitting co-op among several families.

Here's how it works. Invite two or three families to participate. Each family takes a turn providing care to the children of all the members on a rotating basis. This gives each set of parents a night out over the course of each cycle, say once a month, or every other week. There is no cost involved; each family "pays" for the childcare services they receive by providing the same service when it's their turn.

- Family and friends. What child doesn't enjoy occasional sleepovers with friends, cousins, or at grandma's house? Plan your date night around invitations your child receives for sleepovers. As with the babysitter co-op, you can make this a more structured arrangement, planning specific dates when you and a sibling or friend, for example, will trade off overnight hosting duties.



CONCLUSION - MAKE THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY

Relationships that last don't just happen by accident. Like any successful journey, they require planning, attention to detail along the way, and a clear vision of the destination. Intimacy develops and deepens over time, and the moments of your day-to-day life give it substance.

So how do you nurture intimacy amid the chaos of conflicting schedules, competing priorities, and the needs of children, aging parents, careers, and community involvement?

The fun dates are important, but beyond that, remember: It's all in the little things. Here are some creative ways to make the moments fun and meaningful.

- Spouse appreciation day. Don't wait for your spouse's birthday or your anniversary to show your appreciation. Take every opportunity to acknowledge your mate. Even on the busiest days, it doesn't take much to say "thank you". Once a month, celebrate Spouse Appreciation Day. The point is to make an extra effort to express gratitude for the gifts you each bring to the relationship.
- Practice empathy. We all have a need to be heard and understood. One technique that marriage counselors teach their clients is empathetic listening. When a spouse comments on a particularly difficult situation, the partner responds with a statement that communicates that they understand. Paraphrase, then add a sincere response, such as, "I can imagine how frustrating that was for you". No need to solve each other's problems. Listening is important, and letting your partner know you hear them is, too.

- Small tokens – When a three-year-old picks a dandelion and presents it to his mother, she melts. The thought behind the gesture is meaningful, and she is moved by it. Couples can remind each other of their affection in the same way. Little love notes left under the pillow or tucked into each other’s day planners are a sweet surprise. An unexpected hug or kind word eases a stressful day. Bringing home your partner’s favorite snack shows he is on your mind, even when you’re apart.
- Communicate – Just as important as listening is the willingness to communicate your feelings. Say “I love you” often. Send a brief email to say, “You’re on my mind”. Phone your spouse to offer encouragement and support before a big meeting. Take advantage of every opportunity to remind your partner that you’re in this together, for better or worse.

Building and maintaining intimacy is a process that has no ending. It grows and evolves over the years, leaving a tapestry of memories in its wake. While it requires diligence and hard work, the journey should be fun, too, and even during these hectic years, the parents of young families can find ways to nurture each other and their relationships. All it takes is a little creativity...and a lot of love.