



Creating Closeness with your Children and Teens

What activities do you share with your children that are just for fun? Our lives get so busy that most days are consumed by getting through the schedule. We're lucky to get them to school, to activities, fed dinner, and their homework done.

With summer approaching I'm hoping to encourage family fun. When most of our interactions with our kids are about logistics, rules, tasks, problems; it's difficult to create a loving, sharing relationship. As the kids become teens this is often even more difficult – they are naturally (and appropriately) getting more of their emotional needs met by their peers. But they need you even if they rarely show it. A lot of their independence is expressing their need to get ready to be on their own. Sometimes the more rejecting they are, the more conflicted and worried they are about giving you up.

Find shared interests. A friend of mine listened to rap music on his way to work so that he could talk with his kids about the artists they admired. That was above and beyond my job description, but I did read the sports page, watch tv shows and movies together, attend a zillion of their soccer, baseball, volleyball games. The challenge is to do these things giving up your role of authority figure. Don't criticize their choice of music (unless it is truly offensive (sexist, racist) and then you do need to address those issues. You will need to treat a 13 year old differently than a 16 year old, with an understanding of how much power you really have to prohibit access). Let the coach be the coach – don't critique their play. Shoot hoops, walk the dog, cook together, share a chore – fold laundry, clean up after dinner – it takes just a couple of minutes to connect.

Ask them questions that don't have an underlying lesson to teach – you want to understand who they, what they think. If every conversation has an authoritarian message, it won't be a conversation, it will be a lecture – and your kids will not be looking forward to the next one. Ask them their opinions about anything. For young kids: favorite colors, animals, books. For older kids: what they see happening in their world: What makes a good friend? Who's your favorite baseball player, musician, actor, teacher and why? For preteens and teens: ask them how they feel about current events, find moral dilemmas and ask what they think they would do.

Eat dinner together. I know you've heard this – but the advantages are impressive.

[Ten Benefits of Frequent Family Dinners](#)

The more often children and teens eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to smoke, drink and use drugs. Children and teens who have frequent family dinners:

- are at half the risk for substance abuse compared to teens who dine with their families infrequently
- are less likely to have friends or classmates who use illicit drugs or abuse prescription drugs
- have lower levels of tension and stress at home
- are more likely to say that their parents are proud of them
- are likelier to say they can confide in their parents
- are likelier to get better grades in school
- are more likely to be emotionally content and have positive peer relationships
- have healthier eating habits
- are at lower risk for thoughts of suicide
- are less likely to try marijuana or have friends who use marijuana

National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University

<http://www.casacolumbia.org/templates/PressReleases.aspx?articleid=404&zoneid=64>

Play games together. I read an article about a creator of video games and the rules he enforces for his kids. Very interesting. My favorite part (he will not let his kids play violent games and no games during the week) is that on weekends he plays with them.

“At home, where Price does not permit his four children to play violent games, he and his 12-year-old daughter spend a Saturday afternoon sitting side by side, playing “The Sims 3: University Life,” which sparks the most frank discussion he’s ever had with his child about cliques, gender and homosexuality.”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/game-creators-are-in-the-eye-of-the-video-game-storm/2013/04/08/16e2c976-8cd3-11e2-9838-d62f083ba93f_story.html

Find ways to touch. Play games that touch: wrestle, tag, twister.

<http://www.partygamespond.com/tag/physical-contact/> . Sit next to each other on the sofa for reading or watching tv. Give back rubs, foot rubs. Bed time can be a time that kids may be relaxed enough to allow more physical contact, more hugs.

Establish family meetings. Family meetings are a great way to develop family closeness and encourage cooperation.

Jane Nelsen: <http://www.positivediscipline.com/newsletters/family-meetings.html>

Make a summer fun list and put it on the fridge. Ask everyone to list at least one activity and then check them off as you do them. You may need some guidelines such as location and cost.

Pam Mintz

parenting@ymcadc.org

YMCA YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES

7425 MacArthur Blvd, Cabin John, MD 20818

P 301-229-1347 www.ymcadc.org