



The secret to a **stronger** marriage

When you put your relationship with your partner first, it can benefit you *and* your kids **by Teri Cettina** Photographs by Tara Sgroi

Novelist and screenwriter Nora Ephron once wrote, "When you have a baby, you set off an explosion in your marriage, and when the dust settles, your marriage is different from what it was."

My husband, Greg, and I sure felt a big shift. After our two girls, now 7 and 3, were born, our otherwise strong marriage faced more than a few battles—and a lot of just plain neglect. Like most new parents, we were engrossed in taking care of our daughters' everyday needs. Finding time to feed, bathe, and play with them between our work schedules was challenging enough. Hanging out as a couple wasn't even on the to-do list.

But there was more to it than time management. There were the routine squabbles about everything from how to

discipline the girls to our own expectations—and disappointments—about our postbaby selves. I wasn't fun-loving enough anymore; he was watching too much TV and talking to me too little. Through it all, the nagging question remained: How could we nurture our marriage—the relationship that created these beautiful children to begin with—and still manage to be good parents? It often felt like an impossible balancing act.

It happens to the best of us

Many couples do exactly what Greg and I did, says Carol Ummel Lindquist, Ph.D., author of *Happily Married with Kids: It's Not Just a Fairy Tale* and a mom of two. We give plenty of attention to our children and not nearly enough

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to each other. And over time, that shift in focus can start to hurt even the most solid relationships.

"The irony is that a strong relationship with your partner is one of the best things you can do for your kids," Lindquist says. "You and your husband are modeling a good relationship, which sets your children up for better marriages themselves when they grow up."

Sounds ideal—but tough. First of all, we're just more tired. Who's got the energy to be romantic—heck, to even hold a conversation for more than five minutes—after spending a day at the beck and call of a baby? And then there's all that unabashed baby love. More than one doe-eyed mom I know has sheepishly admitted that, for a

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while, she loved her new baby more than her husband. "After Nicholas was born, I suddenly had two important men in my life—my husband and my son," says Jennifer Maldonado of Tualatin, Oregon.

"I was focusing all of

my energy on being a mom. And for a while, my husband and I were just acting like roommates who happened to share responsibility for this new little person."

Pointers for a strong partnership

How can you keep a focus on your marriage when most of your time and energy is devoted to your kids? "Try to treat your relationship with your partner as the one that's most important in your life—even more than the one with your children—and the whole family will benefit from it," says John Rosemond, a family psychologist and author of *John Rosemond's New Parent Power*.

Sounds harsh to put your baby second? Rosemond says he isn't suggesting that parents forget about their kids' needs, and he admits that there will be some natural relationship neglect during the first years of your child's life. But, he says, it's actually pretty easy for you to do small things that will convey to each other—and to the kids—how much you value your relationship.

Ideas to help you keep your marriage strong:

■ Shift your center of attention sometimes

Gretchen Roberts and her husband, Derek, of Fort Wayne, Indiana, want their 2-year-old daughter to know that

they're not always going to drop everything when she wants their attention. "We don't let her demands interrupt our conversations if they're not pressing," says Gretchen. "As she gets older, she'll be able to participate more. But in the meantime she's learning that, with a few exceptions, she has to listen and wait her turn to talk."

■ Create warm welcomes

Sure, you hug your kids and pet your dog every day. But do you greet your husband with the same enthusiasm? Once in a while, kiss and hug as if one of you is going away and you aren't going to see each other for a week. Let the kids giggle: This kind of affection reassures them that you're close to each other, as well as to them.

■ Try 20-minute reconnects

You don't need a whole weekend away or even a regular "date night" to keep the spark alive. Dov and Chana Heller, both Beverly Hills-based marriage therapists and the parents of five, take short walks alone to catch up when they can. Another option: Pair up to chauffeur the kids to day-care or pick them up from an activity, and use the kid-free portion of the commute or waiting time to chat.

■ Set early bedtimes

"When my kids were young, everyone went to bed by eight-thirty every night, no exceptions," says Mary Anne Koski of Lake Oswego, Oregon. She and her husband, Kent, raised nine kids, and the only time they got to spend alone was at the end of the day. "The kids didn't have to be asleep, but they had to be in their rooms and out of our hair. That way, we made sure we got a chance to talk."

■ Share the load

Chore time can also be prime couple time. After putting their daughter to bed each night at 7:30, Jessica Boulris and her husband, Brad, of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, turn off the TV and listen to music while they make lunches for the following day, iron clothes, or fold laundry. There's an added benefit to this kind of couple time: "Because we're helping each other get stuff done, there's no resentment about who does more," says Jessica.

■ Encourage your kids' independence

When children learn to entertain themselves (quietly, we hope) for short periods of time, it means less time you have to spend as your tot's activity director and more time for yourself and your husband. Now that our oldest daughter, Sophie, can pour bowls of cereal and milk for herself and her sister, Flora, Greg and I are able to get an extra ten minutes in bed on weekend mornings. >>

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■ Revive your past

Has your couple-time routine become, well, routine? Ask yourself, "What did we used to have fun doing together?" Whether it's listening to live jazz or playing miniature golf, try it again. "A lot of times those activities have leftover magic in them," says Lindquist. "They can help you remember who you were as a couple before you became parents."

■ Put sex on your schedules

Sounds a bit unspontaneous—and it is. But it's often the only practical way to make sure you keep your intimate relationship on your to-do list. "It's perfectly okay to agree, 'Tuesday night is gonna be our night,'" says Chana Heller. "We all like to look forward to good things."

■ Fight as if the neighbors can hear you

Loud bickering is insulting, says Lindquist, and can zap the intimacy out of any marriage quickly. Throwing verbal low-blows back and forth in front of the kids also shows them you don't respect each other. (Do this often and don't be surprised if your preschooler talks to you in a similarly disrespectful way when you're having a battle.)

■ Remember: Dad's way works, too

Most of us have criticized our husbands for not feeding or dressing our kids exactly as we would do it. "But this can make dad feel more like a parenting aide than an equal partner," says Rosemond. And if he doesn't think you trust him to take care of your kids as well as you do, resentment can build. However, says Rosemond, men should guard against the temptation to skirt the demands of parenting by fleeing to work, the garage, or the couch in front of the TV.

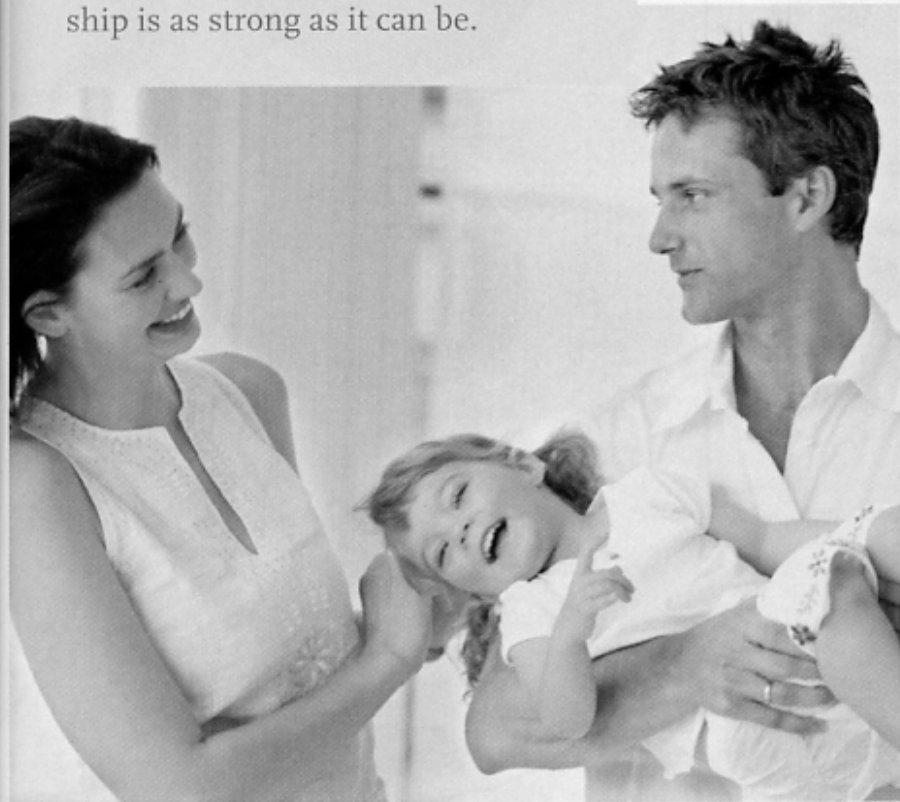
■ Be a cheap date

You already know that a date with your husband can reignite that spark in your relationship—but keep in mind that it doesn't have to be dinner and a movie. If you both work, meeting for lunch while the kids are in daycare can be just as fun as dinner at the same restaurant. Colleen Langenfeld of Monument, Colorado, and her husband actually prefer a "date night" at home, rather than out. They rent a movie, put their two boys to bed, and pop a few frozen dinners in the microwave so nobody has to cook.

■ Understand the stages of marriage

If you can appreciate that the challenging times in your marriage are temporary, you're less likely to feel trapped. Feeling disconnected from your partner while your kids are little is going to happen—and it doesn't mean that your marriage is on the rocks. "Instead, see your anger or frustration as a signal that you just need to back up and make a greater effort to connect with each other," says Lindquist.

A child's greatest comfort? Knowing that her parents' relationship is as strong as it can be.



No matter how hard it may be at times, investing in your marriage now, while your children are young, is vitally important. "One of a child's greatest anxieties is the fear that her parents won't stay together," says Rosemond. "So what is a child's greatest comfort? Knowing that her parents' relationship is as strong as it can be." In other words, you don't have to choose between a happy marriage and happy, secure kids. By having the first, you'll likely get the second as well. ■

Teri Cettina is the mom of two and lives in Portland, Oregon.