

BY KATHRYN STREETER

Want a Healthier Family Life?

Consider these 5 fresh tips

Are you looking at your calendar shaking your head, wondering, how did this happen? It's an ongoing challenge, to set boundaries so that the oxygen in our homes isn't sucked dry by the endless stream of obligations, events and invitations creating exhaustion and unhappiness. Perhaps busyness, one of modern-day families' greatest enemies, can be beaten back by resolving to make changes to maintain our family's mental health.

1 RECONSIDER: MANY OF THESE ACTIVITIES ARE ACTUALLY OPTIONAL

Very often, school notices are invitations. As kids grow, parents should incrementally step back to be less present in their academic world. Sorry, but your child will outgrow the thrill of seeing you in school halls! In her Slate article, Amanda Ripley wonders if parents' hovering presence around schools is back-firing overall. While doing research, she visited top education systems around the world and discovered something "odd" in comparison to American schools: "I hardly saw parents at schools at all." But surely, we may say, sporting events are different, requiring any supportive parent to be in the bleachers 100% of the time. Sports psychologist Dr. Richard D. Ginsburg, however, pushes back in a New York Times interview, noting that continually bending the family calendar to accommodate the sports schedule communicates that kids are "playing for us and not for themselves."

2 EVEN DURING THE BUSIEST SEASONS, SIT DOWN AND DINE TOGETHER

This alone requires resolve, and will be more meaningful if you avoid the temptation to turn weeknight dinners into moments of interrogation, putting kids on the defense. Instead, think of this as a

quick time of debriefing before they split to get homework done. After all, we want them to willingly show up. I appreciate how Samantha Boardman, MD describes it: "Dinner together should come as a welcome break to punctuate your day and not a dreaded chore or additional source of stress." Chilling out around the dinner table, even for 15-minutes, and allowing organic conversation to happen will put your kids at ease and increase the likelihood they'll enjoy time together with you. And that's no small thing.

3 LEARN TO LOVE OUR KIDS' PASSIONS. ENCOURAGE THEIR PURSUITS

Mine has grown to be a foodie. Food and nutrition interests him so much so that I solicit his input for meal planning. This surprising development, one I couldn't have anticipated, has put us side-by-side in the kitchen, experimenting with new foods and recipes. In the US News & World Report, Dr. Gail Saltz highlights the dangers of micro-managing the direction your kids take. She says, "Children who are overscheduled tend to feel highly stressed and have no mental energy left for exploration, curiosity and creative thinking, the very building blocks for developing a true talent." In short, we'll need to protect our growing kids from excessive busyness to provide them bandwidth to explore hobbies and interests. They may have our DNA, but the best parenting will allow them space to be who they are, a completely different person, not a min-version of ourselves.

4 TAKE WALKS TOGETHER

On walks, life slows down, giving way to spontaneous conversation. It could be walking the dog together or parking a few blocks from our destination to enjoy the fresh air, blue sky and general public life on the sidewalk. The point is, to step away from our screens

and be in the company of our blossoming children, no matter if conversation happens or not, will always take us forward relationally—and, physically. In *Prevention Magazine*, authors Sani Harrar and Erin Verkler point out the importance of an ordinary walk. Health benefits include incidental calorie-burning effects and relieving the mind of stress and depression. Harrar and Verkler leave us hungry for more time, more walks, with our kids, whatever their age. Don't hesitate: Go on a walk with yours!

5 WELCOME PEOPLE INTO OUR HOME, OUR FAMILY LIFE

When we host a dinner, it should be a joint family effort, one which relies on each member of the family. For a young person with culinary chops, assign the appetizer. For an artistic child, task the making of dinner place cards to assign seats in advance. Dinner place cards locking-in seating assignments will insure our kids are interspersed with guests, not sequestered at one end. Evenings with dinner guests will also allow them to witness hospitality and kindness in real time. "When they watch me offer a guest the best cut of meat, they learn generosity," says Christine Carter, MD in *Great Good Magazine*. And because our kids were involved in the preparation, they'll experience the intrinsic rewards of service. Maybe, too, they'll learn the art of deft conversation and how to be a gracious guest for when they attend dinner parties one day in the future.

This unwieldy thing called time which we see rapidly coming and going, week after week, isn't going to change. But we can. Deciding to establish healthy parameters and fresh rhythms in our homes will help create a more connected family life. It may also provide a memorable picture of health and happiness for our kids to imitate when they are out of the house, managing their own homes. ☺