



It's All About Time

Member's Guide

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Why Is Family Time Important?

How important is it to spend time together in a positive way as a family? Scientific research on building family strengths has shown consistently that “working and playing together” or “spending positive family time” or “a willingness to spend time together” is among the most critical factors in developing strong family ties. In addition, it is not uncommon for a child to ask a parent to “spend some time with me” or for a spouse to express a hope for “more time together.” Time is the fabric of human existence and perhaps the most meaningful gift one person can give to another. But how do you manage to create family time today when competing with the demands of work, education, entertainment, or other interests?

A father shared the story of sitting down after a day's work in his favorite chair and reaching for a book. To his surprise, the book had disappeared — in fact,

a whole stack of books was gone! He complained to his wife and young sons, asking them if they'd seen his books. His two boys answered yes and responded that they'd hidden the books. When asked why, they said “so you can't read them — and we're not giving them back till you promise to spend some time with us!” The father got the message: *It's one thing to say you value family time, but it's another to actually give time to your family.*

Families come together to share time in different ways based on their habits, needs, and abilities. Family time is not a single type of experience. The idea of **family time** has been defined as a shared experience that creates memories and results in positive feelings of togetherness. Family time can be planned and scheduled by family members or it can be spontaneous and unplanned. What seems important is that the family members willingly share time and try to protect their time together so the distractions are not too great. So, how does your family spend time together? How would you do things differently in creating time for your family relationships?

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Barriers to Family Time Together

Getting past the challenges that may make it difficult to share family time together can be accomplished by identifying those barriers and planning ways to overcome them. Some key types of challenges are listed below. As you think about these barriers consider the following questions: What is your own experience with such challenges? How do you feel about them? How do you adjust to them?

Balancing work and family

- **Work vs. Family Obligations** – Many family members face the challenge of balancing between work and family obligations. Both require attention. Can work be made more flexible? Are there ways to balance these priorities?
- **Changed Family Roles** – Today more men and women work than ever before, and family roles have shifted. Family members often have competing schedules. How can family members balance schedules and reserve time for each other?
- **Transition from Work to Home** – Often a family member will “bring work home from the office,” either literally or emotionally. What can someone do to make a good transition from work to focusing on home?
- **Working to “Get Ahead”** – Work can become all-consuming as people try to make more money or “get ahead.” How much is too much? When is it time to say no?

Hurried family life

- **Overscheduling the Family** – Soccer, dance class, band, volunteer service, movies, hockey — how much does your family have scheduled? “Overscheduling” can inhibit family time together.
- **“Time Famine” or “Time Debt”** – Do you have a famine of time in your life? Are you in “time debt”? How can you slow down and get out of time debt?

The intrusive consumer culture

- **Time is Money Ethic** – Our consumer culture suggests “time is money” and shouldn’t be wasted. Do you ever feel guilty for taking some “down time”? How can you avoid this pressure?
- **The Electronic World** – Media is everywhere in so many forms - radio, cell phones, television, the Internet, portable computers, etc. It occupies so much of daily life. Is there an escape for family members?
- **Round-the-Clock Entertainment** – The culture of today pressures family members to always buy, sell, or look for new entertainment — 24 hours a day! News shows and sports shows are continuous. How can the family create its own time and entertainment?

Distance from family members

- **Overcoming the Miles** – Family members sometimes find themselves separated by distance because of divorce, commuter relationships, work patterns, or other challenges. What activities can be done to connect across the miles? How do we overcome being “dads at a distance” or “moms over miles”? How do grandparents connect with distant family members?
- **Keeping the Family in Mind** – Long-distance family relationships can make it difficult to keep focused on making family a priority. It may be difficult for family members to communicate regularly. How do you keep the family in mind and keep relationships healthy?

Ideas for Sharing Family Time

Coming up with effective and creative strategies for making the most of family time can help families in meeting this priority. Families can spend time together in a variety of different and meaningful ways. A number of types of family time are described below and ideas shared to stimulate your own creativity.

Recreational time

Time shared in fun and recreational activities, such as:

- Play a game of checkers, chess, or another board game together. There are many “family activity” games such as charades, tag, or IQ games.
- Read a book or a book series together. Take turns reading.
- Get outdoors and go to the park, play a ball game, go bowling, ride bikes, or play on the swings. Recreational activities can range from fishing to flying kites!

Learning time

Time shared in positive learning activities, such as:

- Visit the library, a museum, a business, local college, a farm, or other site of interest and learn about its history and purposes.

- Have all family members share about a topic they are working on or studying once a week/month. Have each family member share their thoughts and ideas on the topic. Decide what topics you want to learn more about.
- Pick a specific topic or activity to pursue and learn more about, then put together a journal or scrapbook about it. It could be about a sport, historical figure, musical instrument, animal — whatever interests you!

Work time

Time shared in working together in a positive way, such as:

- Create a job wheel and decide who gets to do what job each week around the house. Team up and work together to accomplish household tasks.
- Select specific projects you need to do or would like to do as a family to improve your home, such as washing the windows or building a tree house.
- Find a community service project that the family can be involved in together.

Communication/leisure time

Time spent in conversation and relaxation together, such as:

- Make a list of 100 questions to provoke conversation and sharing, like “What’s your most memorable experience?” or “How would you change the world and why?” Pick one or two times a week to share and discuss two or three questions at dinner or other times.
- Schedule a family meeting time to regularly share feelings, discuss issues, or go on outings.

Family unity time

Time spent in activities to build family unity, such as:

- Create a scrapbook that is a history of your family and past ancestors.
- Practice family safety efforts such as making an emergency preparedness plan or a first aid kit.

Family Time in Varying Circumstances

Families face a variety of circumstances. Perhaps you are a single mother. Perhaps you are a grandparent with children living some distance away. In such situations, the challenges you face in sharing family time may differ somewhat from those presented here. But the issue remains the same — spending meaningful, positive time in building family relationships. The “Resources” section at the end of this guide has some information that can be accessed for further ideas about sharing family time.

The NDSU Extension Service has bulletins on a number of specific family circumstances, including co-parenting in the context of separation or divorce and grandparenting. For example, the NDSU Extension Circular FS-562, “Focus on the Little Things: Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships,” has a variety of good ideas about how grandparents can maximize their family time with grandchildren. Another resource on this topic is NDSU Extension Circular FS-547, “More than Cookies and Milk: Grandparenting and Step-Grandparenting.” If you would like more information about such resources, please contact your local county Extension office.

Family Goals for Sharing Family Time

Sharing family time makes it possible for family members to communicate with each other, build common memories, and develop their love for each other. Each family shares time together in its own way and based on the needs of the family at a particular time. But a commitment to shared family time sends the message that building family relationships will be a priority in the family. Thinking consciously about how family time is shared and setting goals to create positive experiences together can help families in developing close and lasting personal relationships. You might want to use NDSU Extension Circular FS-522, “Family Communication and Family Meetings,” to guide how you plan your own communication about sharing family time.

Evaluate How You Share Family Time

Ask yourself or discuss in a family setting the following questions:

- Is our family spending our time as we wish?
- How would we like to spend our time?
- What is preventing us from spending our time as we want?
- What can we change so that we can spend our time as we would like to?
- Are there things we should modify or adapt in how we share family time?
- Is family time valued by our family members?

Consider meaningful experiences of sharing time

Write an answer to the following two questions:

1. What are experiences I've had in sharing family time that have been most meaningful to me that I would like to continue or experience again?

2. What are ways of sharing family time that I think would be meaningful to myself and other family members that I would like to begin?

Set goals for sharing family time

Set goals for sharing positive time with family members. Brainstorm and be as specific as possible.

Recreational Time

1. _____
2. _____

Learning Time

1. _____
2. _____

Work Time

1. _____
2. _____

Communication/Leisure Time

1. _____
2. _____

Family Unity Time

1. _____
2. _____

Resources

Family Communication and Family Meetings. (1996, October). NDSU Extension Service Circular FS-522.

Family Connections Web site, NDSU Extension Service, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND. Can be accessed at <http://www.ext.nodak.edu/parenting/Family-Connections.htm>

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Sharing Family Time: Simple Ways to Make the Most of Busy Days. (1998). Appleton, WI: Aid Association for Lutherans. More information can be accessed at www.aal.org

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