



Seize the day

A friend of mine once told me that when he got married he had four theories of child-rearing and no children. 'Now I have four children and no theories,' he says with a rueful smile. One thing is certain in a changing world: many of the old formulas about living don't any longer hold water. On the other hand there are timeless principles that really do work.

THE REAL
CRAVING OF
CHILDREN
IN ANY
GENERATION
IS A FATHER'S
(OR MOTHER'S)
PRESENCE

1 Carpe diem

In *The Dead Poets Society* Robin Williams plays a teacher struggling to achieve some sort of rapport with his pupils. One day he and his pupils walk down a corridor lined with old photographs of past students of the school. Dozens of young people, captured on celluloid, stare out of the frames; faces full of potential, lives at the start of their journey. But many are now dead, ravaged by wars in Germany, France, Korea and Vietnam.

The normally boisterous pupils are silent as they gaze back in time at the faces of previous generations, and their teacher whispers in their ears the Latin phrase 'Carpe diem - Seize the day'. It means simply that none of our tomorrows are guaranteed and we need to make the most of every opportunity today.

The Carpe Diem principle is nowhere truer than in relations with our children. And this is because the door of childhood closes so fast and finally. One of the reasons we don't spend quality time with our children is that, when they are small, we believe there will always be a tomorrow.

*Gather ye rosebuds while you may,
Old time is still a flying,
And that same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.*
Robert Herrick

2 Start with the nappies

One of the best ways for a father to communicate with a new daughter is by changing her nappy. This may lead to giving her a bath. Hold her in your arms as often as possible: you may get good at it

and even begin to like it. Nursing research shows that touch can be healing. Talk to her as if she can understand every word you say. You may find that these tasks become habituating. These habits will also communicate to other members of your family who may ask for special time too.

3 Show and tell

Tell your children every day that you love them. Seven percent of communication comes through the spoken word, the rest is made up of tone and gesture et cetera. So even small children can read our confused and less than honest communication. We need to show the love we are professing. Communication by showing takes a little extra time. But maybe the measure of our love is this little extra time. We need to get below the surface with children. Your 14 year-old son may say, 'Now I'm a teenager forget about hugging me!' Underneath he may still wish you would.

4 Build lifelong hobbies

Start a hobby or leisure activity with your child that is not dependent on your physical fitness. You may do it together for the rest of your life. If at first you don't succeed, take the time to keep trying. This is a message that will communicate.

5 Have fun

Life is serious. There is pain and sorrow on every hand. There are bills to pay, and examinations to pass, there is healthy eating to attend to, and discipline to be imparted. All that is true, but

childhood needs to be a time for laughter. We somehow have to raise children who can cope with the serious issues of life and yet can remember years of laughter. That may involve *us* in learning to laugh again.

When my children were small they used to love having what we called a 'family night'. They would drag their mattresses into our bedroom and sleep on the floor. But once in a while we would have a 'super family night'. That involved us all sleeping on the lounge floor together. There are no logical reasons why four people with perfectly good beds should want to do that; except that it's fun.

I was once speaking at a conference and described this in a little more detail. I said, 'It's wonderful. We all lie there in the dark, with the fire on, listening to story tapes and eating too much chocolate.' When I finished speaking I knew I was in trouble. I'd done enough public speaking to be able to recognise that look at 100 yards. She cornered me and said: 'Do you think it's wise to encourage children to eat chocolate just before they go to bed? Their teeth will rot.' That's a killjoy in action. They smell a little fun and swoop. I wearily explained, 'Yes, they did clean their teeth afterwards...'. But children love those who have time not only to teach them, but to have fun with them.

6 Develop traditions

Develop family traditions **together**. This could be as simple as cooking hamburgers every Saturday night. You can build traditions around all sorts of events: Christmas, birthdays, even visits to Granny. Your children will look forward to them and remember them when they're grown up.

7 Let them hear what you think

In the film *True Lies*, Arnold Schwarzenegger has a teenage daughter who he finds hard to control. One of his colleagues from work explains why he may be finding it so difficult. 'You're not her parents any more. Her parents are Axl Rose [the lead singer in the heavy metal rock group Guns and Roses] and Madonna. Don't think that the five minutes you spend with her can compete with that kind of bombardment.'

If we want our children to accept our values, we have to pass them on. Those values could be spiritual; if I want my children to believe, I need to take time to explain the Christian faith. They may be sexual; if so I need the courage to talk to them openly about both the wonder and dangers of sex. If I have things that I believe are right or wrong, I have to let them know what these are. They may reject these values, but if they matter to me, I dare not leave it just to others to teach them.

8 I love you - anyway

The key to a child's heart is to let them know we love them regardless. There is no more powerful

force on the face of the earth for building strong relationships than unconditional love. I learnt that lesson the hard way. I remember my daughter coming home from school. She came running in, yelling, 'Dad, I got 95% in maths.' I had two questions for that little girl. 'What happened to the 5%?' and 'Where did you come in the class?' I'm not proud of that memory. Katie has a whole life in front of her filled with those who want her when she succeeds. I want to motivate her to be the best she can be, but more than that, I want her to know that my love for her is not based on success but on the fact that I'm her father.

9 Be wise about when to go into battle

People in the military will tell you that occasionally it's vital to pick fights. The constant question needs to be, 'Is this a situation that's worth doing battle over?' If not, we risk being backed into a corner with no way out, for no good reason.

One father I know described a battle he wished he'd never entered.

My daughter came home one evening with bright orange hair. I hit the roof. My first thought was, 'What will people think of us?' I told her that she would never look like that under my roof, and to get it changed. She refused and I was left with either backing down or making her leave. As it was we didn't speak for a month. We're fine together now, but I almost lost my daughter over some stupid hair dye.

10 Give them what I do have

Dr James Dobson has said: 'We are so busy giving our children what we didn't have, that we don't have time to give them what we did have'. Your nine year-old son will forget the television you bought for his bedroom. True, it will always seem kind to him. It will never say, 'Later'. It will always say sit down with me now. It will, in the isolation of his room, go about the business of educating him. It was expensive, but it will never be a memory he will cherish.

But he will never forget the night that you and he slept in the garden in an old tent somebody lent you. He will remember the sense of thrill as you both ate too many marshmallows, and how he felt when the battery in the torch failed and it was darker than he had ever known. And when he is old he'll still remember it.

And there it is – the greatest dilemma of being a parent in a society where love can easily be measured in presents whilst the real craving of children in any generation is a father's (or mother's) presence.

*Rob Parsons is Director of Care for the Family. His latest book, *The Sixty Minute Mother*, is published by Hodder & Stoughton, £6.99.*



Rob Parsons suggests ten principles about parenting that Christian doctors should both practise and preach



KEY POINTS

The door of childhood closes fast and finally so we need to 'seize the day' now to build strong relationships with our children. There are timeless principles of child-rearing that really work: developing family traditions, starting joint leisure activities, enjoying fun and laughter together and constantly demonstrating our love in both word and action. If we want our children to share our values we have to pass them on, both verbally and by example. Conflict is inevitable but we need to pick our fights wisely, and whatever happens, let them know that we love them regardless. Overall, the greatest craving of children in any generation is a father's or mother's presence.