

COPING WITH YOUR CHILD'S BUSY SCHEDULE

Almost a month back in school and I am feeling exhausted just trying to find a way to keep my family sane, fed and happy! Already I am feeling unraveled by the time constraints put on our family by juggling two children's extra curricular activities, working part-time and my determination to have "family dinners" during the week!

My first parenting dilemma is "how do I stay connected to my children in a meaningful way, given all the time they are spending away from home and from me?" To me, connection is more than asking my son or daughter "Did you have a good time?" I need them to experience me in their minds and hearts when we are together and when we are apart. Because it won't be long now before they move into their teenage years, I want to "be in their face" to let them know that "Big Mother" is watching them- not because I don't trust them, but because I want my husband and I to be symbols to our children of how to conduct themselves responsibly. Do I want to hand that responsibility over to the twelve year old boy living next door who requests all-day play dates? Or the family friend who is funny, but lacks life skills? Or the coach who's more interested in winning at any cost than teaching his team how to compete with integrity? I want to hear how they are putting life together, so I can be empathic to their experience and, if they allow, help them learn to choose a positive course of action. For me, empathy is a critical communication skill.

I am now using my bedtime routine to hear and learn about what my children are experiencing. So where once I used to read stories and tuck them in, I now lie beside them and help them unwind, and ask them what was the best and the worst of their day. I like to play the "what if..." game to get a sense of their reasoning abilities and problem solving skills. If I feel we have been too busy during the week, I try to manage a morning time "massage wake up call," and to snuggle up and be playful. That will hopefully remind them that I am not *always* a task master! And of course, there is the always popular "van therapy," where I as the parent ask provocative questions while

driving, in the hopes of getting an honest response since I'm not looking into their face with my "this better be good" expression. Because driving consumes a lot of time, I enjoy playing age-appropriate story CDs from the library that make us all feel someone is "taking care" of us. I have found these story CDs to be a good spring-board for conversations when waiting for a lesson to start, or when there is a moral to the story that can be used at a later time. It also seems to help everyone unwind when we are driving all over the North Shore to get to lessons or practices on time.

The second dilemma on my list, is how do I make my life more manageable so my guilt about not being a perfect mother doesn't get in the way of enjoying these years? I refuse to stay up past 10 pm to clean and do laundry, because I've learned from hard experience I will be grumpy the next day, and that spells bad news for the family. I am learning this year more than ever how to "buy time." A good example of this was at my son's first soccer practice, when one of the parents took charge of finding out who lives near her neighbourhood and stated her need to share rides throughout the week for the two practices. It worked to everyone's benefit, and now I can use that extra time to spend some one to one time with my other child and hopefully make a proper meal. I am also asking the kids to practice their music instrument in the morning before school, to avoid late night excuses or arguing.

After reviewing our schedule, there will be at least 4 nights where we all won't be able to sit down together to share dinner hour, so I am trying to have a warm dinner between 4-5pm to cut down on the "snacking in vehicle" meal. It will work for at least 3 out of the 4 family members. And last but not least, I am going to have to accept that the crock pot is my new best friend. You just can't beat a one pot meal to make everyone feel "taken care of".