

How to Have a Happy Marriage When You're Busy Being Parents

By Elizabeth Pantley, Author of *Kid Cooperation*, *Perfect Parenting* and *Hidden Messages*

Is your marriage everything you ever hoped it could be? Or has it been pushed down your list of priorities since having children? Let's face it, parenthood is a full-time job, and it dramatically changes your marriage relationship. But marriage is the foundation upon which your entire family is structured. If your marriage is strong, your whole family will be strong; your life will be more peaceful, you'll be a better parent, and you'll, quite simply, have more fun in your life.

Make a commitment

To create or maintain a strong marriage you will have to take the first critical step: *You must be willing to put time, effort and thought into nurturing your marriage.* The ideas that follow will help you follow through on this commitment and will put new life and meaning into your marriage. A wonderful thing may happen. You may fall in love with your spouse all over again. In addition, your children will greatly benefit from your stronger relationship. Children feel secure when they know that Mom and Dad love each other—particularly in today's world, where 50 percent of marriages end in divorce; half of your children's friends have gone, or are going through a divorce; or maybe it's your kids who have survived a divorce and are now living in a new family arrangement. Your children need daily proof that their family life is stable and predictable. When you make a commitment to your marriage, your children will feel the difference. No, they won't suffer from neglect! They'll blossom when your marriage—and their homelife—is thriving.

The surprising secret is that this doesn't have to take any extra time in your already busy schedule. Just a change in attitude plus a committed focus can yield a stronger, happier marriage.

So here's my challenge to you. Read the following suggestions and apply them in your marriage for the next 30 days. Then evaluate your marriage. I guarantee you'll both be happier.

Look for the good, overlook the bad

You married this person for many good reasons. Your partner has many wonderful qualities. Your first step in adding sizzle to your marriage is to look for the good and overlook the bad.

Make it a habit to ignore the little annoying things — dirty socks on the floor, a day-old coffee cup on the counter, worn out flannel pajamas, an inelegant burp at the dinner table — and choose instead to search for those things that make you smile: the way he rolls on the floor with the baby; the fact that she made your favorite cookies, the peace in knowing someone so well that you *can* wear your worn out flannels or burp at the table.

Give two compliments every day

Now that you've committed to seeing the good in your partner, it's time to say it! This is a golden key to your mate's heart. Our world is so full of negative input, and we so rarely get compliments from other people. When we do get a compliment, it not only makes us feel great about ourselves, it actually makes us feel great about the person giving the compliment! Think about it! When your honey says, "You're the best. I'm so glad I married you." It not only makes you feel loved, it makes you feel more loving.

Compliments are easy to give, take such a little bit of time, and they're free. Compliments are powerful; you just have to make the effort to say them. Anything works: "Dinner was great, you make my favorite sauce." "Thanks for picking up the cleaning. It was very thoughtful, you saved me a trip." "That sweater looks great on you."

Play nice

That may sound funny to you, but think about it. How many times do you see -- or experience -- partners treating each other in impolite, harsh ways that they'd never even treat a friend? Sometimes we take our partners for granted and unintentionally display rudeness. As the saying goes, if you have a choice between being right and being nice, just choose to be nice. Or to put this in the wise words of Bambi's friend Thumper, the bunny rabbit – "If you can't say somethin' nice don't say nothin' at all."

Pick your battles

How often have you heard this advice about parenting? This *is* great advice for child-rearing—and it's great advice to follow in your marriage as well. In any human relationship there will be disagreement and conflict. The key here is to decide which issues are worth pursuing and which are better off ignored. By doing this, you'll find much less negative energy between you.

From now on, anytime you feel annoyed, take a minute to examine the issue at hand, and ask yourself a few questions. "How important is this?" "Is this worth picking a fight over?" "What would be the benefit of choosing this battle versus letting it go?"

The 60 second cuddle

You can often identify a newly married couple just by how much they touch each other — holding hands, sitting close, touching arms, kissing — just as you can spot an "oldly-married" couple by how little they touch. Mothers, in particular, often have less need for physical contact with their partners because their babies and young children provide so much opportunity for touch and cuddling that day's end finds them "touched fulfilled".

So here's a simple reminder: make the effort to touch your spouse more often. A pat, a hug, a kiss, a shoulder massage – the good feeling it produces for both of you far outweighs the effort.

Here's the deal: Whenever you've been apart make it a rule that you will take just 60 seconds to cuddle, touch and connect. This can be addictive! If you follow this advice soon you'll find yourselves touching each other more often, and increasing the romantic aspect of your relationship.

Spend more time talking to and listening to your partner.

I don't mean, "Remember to pick up Jimmy's soccer uniform." Or "I have a PTA meeting tonight." Rather, get into the habit of sharing your thoughts about what you read in the paper, what you watch on TV, your hopes, your dreams, your concerns. Take a special interest in those things that your spouse is interested in and ask questions. And then listen to the answers.

Spend time with your spouse

It can be very difficult for your marriage to thrive if you spend all your time being “Mommy” and “Daddy”. You need to spend regular time as “Husband” and “Wife”. This doesn’t mean you have to take a two-week vacation in Hawaii. (Although that might be nice, too!) Just take small daily snippets of time when you can enjoy uninterrupted conversation, or even just quiet companionship, without a baby on your hip, a child tugging your shirtsleeve or a teenager begging for the car keys. A daily morning walk around the block or a shared cup of tea after all the children are in bed might work wonders to re-connect you to each other. And yes, it’s quite fine to talk about your children when you’re spending your time together, because, after all, your children are one of the most important connections you have in your relationship.

When you and your spouse regularly connect in a way that nurtures your relationship, you may find a renewed love between you, as well as a refreshed vigor that will allow you to be a better, more loving parent. You owe it to yourself — and to your kids — to nurture your relationship.

So take my challenge and use these ideas for the next 30 days. And watch your marriage take on a whole new glow.

Parts of this article are excerpted with permission from books by Elizabeth Pantley:

Kid Cooperation: How to Stop Yelling, Nagging and Pleading Hidden Messages: What Our Words and Actions are Really Telling Our Children,

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Website: <http://www.pantley.com/elizabeth>