

Family

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THE QUICK Q&A Securing family ties

Author Susan Smith Kuczmariski advises parents to allow differences to flourish if they're looking to build family bonds. She says that "everyone doesn't have to be alike."

The quick Q&A

Go with the flow to nurture family ties

NAME: Susan Smith Kuczmariski

BACKGROUND: Susan Smith Kuczmariski's "The Family Bond" (Contemporary Books, \$12.95) offers practical tips for creating closeness within families. Kuczmariski, an authority on the sociology of family culture, lectures and conducts workshops for parents and educators.

Q—How do you describe your book?

A—I'd say it's about family-making rather than parenting, about how to connect and have fun and still be free to grow individually. It's about viewing each other as equals, and allowing differences within families to flourish. Everyone doesn't have to be alike.

Q—You talk about left-brain, right-brain parenting. Both halves are involved?

A—We use our left brain so much at work—the logical, rational, analytical, take-charge side—but there's a whole other side that has an incredible beauty. It brings opportunities not only to children but also to parents. Play is so important.

Q—Parenting as "flow"?

A—Looking at it that way makes it a lot easier, a lot more rewarding and a lot less tiring. I suggest taking 15 minutes a day with each of your children and don't organize it for them. Let them take the lead and share whatever they want to do. That's a type of flow. Rather than saying, "Let's get in the car and do this and then this." There's an energy that comes when you let yourself sit back more.

Q—And do nothing?

A—Do nothing and see what happens. You may be surprised to discover you're experiencing some of the same things your kids are. My 9-year-old has a better balance to his day than I do. He's teaching me to say

no to things. At the beginning of the day he says he feels good; at the end of the day he feels even better. Well, I want to feel that.

When you flow you're more receptive to the passage of the events of the day, to the magic of the ordinary moment. Here we are at breakfast and we're together and wow—this is joy.

Q—People are scared to death of doing nothing, but it's so valuable.

A—You get a little bit of it and you want more.



Kuczmariski

Q—Quiet can be hard to come by. Do you have rules about TV and computers in your house?

A—My kids know how I feel. If they've been on the computer too long, I let them know. At certain times I really don't like the TV on. They've had a smaller dose of TV than other kids because of that. I think technology can get in the way of talk.

Q—And of being resourceful?

A—Children need to experience inactivity—"hammock time"—and learn how to make the best of it and enjoy it. Especially teens. Their thought patterns are so busy and involved. I don't think parents realize how much time it takes to interact with peer groups.

Q—And how much psychic energy.

A—I walked into a high school a few years back and I had this feeling of "I am on display here," of people checking me out. I'll never forget that. It was so vivid, and I was an adult.

Q—You talk to your children as much as you can, to balance that busyness?

A—We do. And I think it's important to

walk down unknown conversational paths. Parents feel safe when they're in familiar territory but I think teens especially need deep talk. It can be very nourishing. Opening up different topics, even topics you're not certain of, can lead to rich experiences. Dream out loud. Explore different subjects. Teens have a lot of fears.

Q—You suggest that parents not be too quick to mediate conflict.

A—The teen years are full of conflict, and you should let teens have the experience of working it through. Normally parents step in and resolve it or say, "You should do this," but if you can work it out as a group—whether it's a problem of curfew or household chores or whatever—it can teach a lot of good things.

Q—You also advise getting each person in the family to say out loud what's important to them.

A—You think you know those things, but you're often not aware of the level of importance. I didn't realize that to my 9-year-old summer vacation is one of the most important things. I knew my teenagers think spending time with their friends is important but to hear them say it's the most important thing was really key.

Q—It probably did them good to articulate it.

A—It's true of strengths too. We have a consciousness of what our strengths are, but it's important to talk and to identify them.

Q—You compare listening to catching a Frisbee. You have to be ready for the conversation to go anywhere.

A—You might hear things you're not expecting to hear. And if you can communicate that you're not going to judge, they'll keep coming.

Joanne Trestrail