

# Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County

## Family Time: Accept No Substitute

Patricia A. Frey, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

One of the most important things parents can do for their children is spend time with them. That's the opinion of Emanuel Doyne, M.D., an Eastgate pediatrician who has been attending to the physical and emotional well being of children for 27 years.

"Parents may not be aware of it, but they're the main role models for their children," said Dr. Doyne, also associate director of the division of community pediatrics at Children's Hospital Medical Center of Cincinnati. "By their example, parents teach children how to deal with the world and how to parent their own children when they reach adulthood."

"Whether they plan special activities for their children or spend unstructured time with them doesn't matter, as long as they're with them," he said.

One natural time for families to be together is mealtime, according to Blake Bowden, Ph.D., and a clinical psychologist in the division of developmental disorders at Cincinnati Children's. His study of 527 teens revealed that one major lifestyle difference between 'adjusted' and 'non-adjusted' teens was that the former ate more meals each week with their families.

"Through their example, busy parents can instruct their children about priorities. By taking time to eat a family meal, they're saying, 'Even though I have 15 projects at work or repairs to do around home, I'm going to spend this time with you,'" he said.

"But eating together doesn't mean sitting around the table watching television or reading a newspaper," Dr. Bowden stressed. "Whether it's at mealtime or not, the time parents spend with children should be child-focused and include positive, respectful sharing."

Mealtime is just one 'key time' when parental presence adds to the quality of life. A 1997 survey of 12,118 teens concluded that if they felt close to their parents, teens were less likely to engage in risky behavior, such as violence and drug use. They experienced less emotional distress if parents were present "at waking, after school, at dinner and at bedtime," according to the study sponsored by the American Medical Association.

"Family time will vary according to the age and interests of children," said Dr. Doyne. Elementary school children enjoy activities such as birthday parties, outings to the zoo or sports events. As their children move into adolescence, parents can bond during activities that reflect mutual interests, whether that's helping with aging grandparents or supporting local recycling efforts. Parental time with children should include both parents, even if children live with only one.

"Just the presence of the non-custodial parent in a child's life is the best gift," said Dr. Bowden. "A holiday or birthday filled with expensive gifts is never a substitute for parental presence."

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"At all stages of a child's development, it's important that fathers and mothers create an atmosphere where children can talk about what's on their minds," Dr. Doyne noted. "Let them know you're there for them when they want to share."

Especially at the beginning and end of adolescence, Dr. Bowden's study revealed, teens crave adult contact. Even though teens may sometimes be hesitant about communicating, parents need to keep talking and listening during the time they've set aside for their children.

How much time is enough family time? Dr. Doyne said recent studies have put to rest the "quality vs. quantity time" debate, confirming that families with two working parents can be as productive and well-adjusted as those with one stay-at-home parent.

"Feeling guilty that you're not spending enough time with your children is self-defeating," he said. "Whether it's 15 minutes or three hours a day, do the best you can with the time you have."