

Time, Energy and Priorities: One Habit You'll Want to Keep!

Work, grocery shopping, yard work, laundry, driving the kids to soccer, arranging play dates, meeting friends for dinner, completing homework, spending time alone with your partner, birthday parties, visiting extended family—where does the list end! Add to the already long list therapy, psychiatric appointments, tutoring, school meetings, and occupational, physical and/or speech therapy. All children need time. The adopted child with a history of complex trauma (i.e., abuse, neglect, abandonment, institutionalization) may require extensive time.

The typical children in the family begin to get short-changed. Below are comments made by typically-developing children, ages 11 through 19 after their families adopted children with special needs:

“I lost a lot of attention because I was the only child until they came. My parents told me I would lose attention, but I never thought it would be as much as it has been.”

“We lost a peaceful family. When they came, we had to spend so much time with them. Attention to me was lost.”

“We lose time with our parents because they are always with him.”

“I’ve lost a lot of time with my parents. I remember my mom, me and my sisters could just go out shopping like every weekend. Now, I don’t want to be in the house. I go out and find things to do. I do anything to get out of the chaos of the house.”

“Our time with our parents was taken. My brother and my dad used to go golfing and every Sunday I used to go shopping or out to eat with my mom. We can’t do this anymore because they take up so much time.”

“We lost shopping time. It seems like we are always worried about money. It seems like we can never get anything done. As soon as something is finished, it seems like there is a problem with Gabe and we all have to stop and wait for that to end.”

“Since the adoption, things have changed a lot in our household. After my adopted sibling was brought into our lives, Mom and Dad switched to focusing more on my adopted sibling. They started seeing signs of irregular behavior around the age of three or four and took my adopted sister to multiple doctors’ offices to try to understand what was going on.

That was only the beginning. As my sibling grew older and older, the problems got worse. She would have a fit when she couldn’t get one of the many things she wanted. She also started lashing out for the simplest of things, such as making noise in her play area, asking her to get off of the computer, etc.

My parents started paying a lot more attention to her, and therefore, less on my brother and me. It has gotten to a point where they spend almost 100% of their time on her. This has really discouraged me because it makes me feel like I’m not really important.”

Adding another child to the family increases the grocery list, the pile of laundry and the transportation duties to and from extra curricula activities. But, the arrival of a new child in the

family many also mean that time will be diverted to the newly adopted child due to the parental attention and professional services this child may need to improve his physical, emotional, cognitive and social well-being.

I strongly advise parents to “start a habit” of spending regular time with each of the children in the family starting the day the adoptee arrives in the family. As the comments above make clear the children already in the family at the time their new brother or sister arrived mourn the loss of time spent with Mom and Dad. Parents may compound this situation by thinking, “We can make up the time once Johnny is better.” Or, resident children are often sacrificed as they are viewed as more capable, “They can do without as much time. They do so well.” Or “They understand that we need to work with Sally.”

A few suggestions as to how make this habit happen come from adoptive parents:

Michelle who parents two children by birth and one by adoption says,

“We home school all three children. Our adopted son throws fits on and off all day, every day. The stress of his screaming affected me and his daughters. So, one day per week, he goes to a child care center. He is able to do well outside of the home in relationships that aren’t intimate. He enjoys going and my daughters and I enjoy some nice time together.”

Nina, a single adopted parent of two adopted children—one typically-developing and one with mental health issues states,

“Fortunately, my mentally unhealthy daughter doesn’t mind going to her room. So, in the evening, she goes to her room 30 minutes earlier than my healthy daughter. She doesn’t have to go to sleep. She just needs to stay in her room. This is my special time each day to be with my typical daughter.”

Tony, adoptive dad to four children—three by birth and one by adoption says,

“My wife and I live close to our kids’ school. We often surprise the kids by showing up to take them out to lunch. Sometimes, we even ‘kidnap’ our birth children. We take them out of school for the afternoon, and we go do something special. While we value education, we value our time with our kids too. Our adopted child has many needs and this makes it difficult to go out as a family or to find respite for him. Given the choice between social studies or time with the children, we choose time with the kids.”

Right now I want you to get your date book and schedule appointments with your children. Work with your spouse, friends, neighbors, extended family, support group companions, etc. to keep these appointments.

Make making time with all of your children a habit—a habit to keep!