

THE PARENT TRAP

The best gift you can give to your kids is a great marriage, experts say. So, put your spouse first.

Before the kids came along, you did practically everything together. Friday nights were spent at the movies, and on weekends, you slept in, treated yourselves to brunch, and did fun couple things together.

These days, however, your weekends are spent with the kids, ferrying them to and from enrichment classes, helping them with their homework and seeing to their needs. Your trips to the mall are never without your brood and holidays are planned around what your little ones want to do. In fact, your lives revolve so much around your kids that you now feel more like “Mummy and Daddy” than “Husband and Wife”. So, what happened?

Doing it for the kids

When you became parents, your relationship went from being just about the two of you to being about another individual, says Theresa Bung, principal therapist at Family Life Society. “Your priorities and focus shifted. You used to put yourselves first, but when this new little person came along, all your resources went to him or her. In the course of this, the dynamics of your marriage changed and your central identities came to be more of parent than spouse.”

In addition to constantly being in parent mode, all your resources such as time and money are channelled towards your kids’ needs. Most of your salary now goes to enrichment classes, toys, clothes,

treats, and holidays for your kids. In fact, you’ve sacrificed a great deal for them just so they can grow up to be happy, functional individuals.

Are you “just parents”?

According to Theresa, being “just parents” can pose a danger to your marriage. With your thoughts, conversations and actions mostly centred on your kids, you may, over time, lose touch with your spouse. “Your intimacy, closeness and communication may suffer, and when this happens, you may find that you are no longer able to meet each

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HOW TO TELL YOU'RE ‘JUST PARENTS’

- ★ You call each other “Mummy” and “Daddy”
- ★ At night, you sleep with your kids in their beds instead of each other in your marital bed
- ★ You find it hard to go out just with your spouse. Whenever you go out, it is always as a family
- ★ You neglect each other’s needs as you’re too focused on fulfilling your kids’ needs

other’s needs,” she says. You may also stop doing nice things for each other because you’ve become so used to doing things for the kids.

It can also affect your social life. When out with friends, you might feel guilty about not being at home with your kids. And not being able to spend time with your friends the way you used to can bring about a sense of loneliness and isolation.

There’s also the impact on the self. Says Theresa: “Your attention will be divided. You may lose touch with what you’re about and experience guilt every time you do something nice for yourself. In the long term, you may lose your identity as a person and neglect things such as self-care and personal development.” Some parents may also forgo their dreams for their kids’ sake and this can cause resentment down the road.

If you have a special needs child or are a stay-at-home parent, it might be even harder to maintain your marriage, friendships, and your self-identity, because your kids are your sole focus and it’s likely that all your time, attention and energy will be given to them.

Put your marriage first

In his latest book, *To Raise Happy Kids, Put Your Marriage First*, American family therapist David Code theorises that neglecting your spouse and marriage in the name of parenthood can have disastrous effects on your kids and your sense of individuality. If you want offspring that are happy, satisfied and well adjusted, he says, you should strive to be the perfect spouse rather than focusing all your time and energy on being the perfect parent.

Theresa agrees. “A strong and loving relationship with your spouse will help your kids feel more grounded,” she explains. “When your marriage foundation isn’t solid, your kids may live in fear that their family will someday fall apart. They may be anxious all the time and this fear may affect their schoolwork, friendships and behaviour.”

But when your kids see that Mum and Dad are invested in their relationship and committed to each other, they will feel more secure. This makes for happier, well-adjusted kids and a more fulfilling family life.

HOW TO REINVENT YOURSELVES AS A COUPLE

- Make it a point to talk to each other daily, about anything other than the kids. But make sure the conversation isn’t superficial. You should discuss your feelings and your needs in order to reconnect with each other.
- Take a short romantic holiday together without your kids.
- What can you do to make your spouse feel extra-loved and special? Ask your spouse what it is, and do it.
- Have “couple time” at least once a week. “Kids need to understand the importance of their parents needing time together, so explain this to them,” says Theresa Bung, principal therapist at Family Life Society.
- Spend time on your appearance so you look good for each other.