

Introduction

“Make Love Whenever Possible When Married With Children” is playful and poignant with spirited vignettes like “Seduce your spouse with humor,” “Be a flasher,” and “Experience the post-vasectomy sexual renaissance.” Leslie Kaplan and Peg Melnik teamed up to write the book for staying sane within the madness of family life. The authors firmly believe couples are living their most challenging years when they have children under their roof.

While the divorce rate in America is at an astonishing 62 percent, staying happily married with children is not an insurmountable challenge as long as you realize it requires a kind of vigilance. It requires perspective, insight and most importantly, the energy to keep a strong connection with your spouse.

The authors use wisdom and wit to detail valuable tips drawn from their own experiences. Kaplan and Melnik’s survival guide will no doubt be a compelling read, the best-selling bible for the married-with-kids crowd. The Three Universal Truths of Living with Kids:

1. Children jolt parents into warp drive. They have a whirlwind of frantic needs to be tended—food, clothing, shelter and comfort—to name a few.
2. Children spend most of their waking hours interrupting parents, so parents need to acclimate themselves to distraction. In fact, parents need to manage their time based on the notion that kids are, by nature, interrupters.
3. Children pull parents in more directions than imaginable with their activities—Girl Scouts, piano, soccer, swim team, play dates and parties. This harried pace makes it a challenge for parents to schedule time to nurture their significant other and keep their relationships rock solid.

A Paradigm Shift

We are the generation hell-bent on getting this parenthood thing down. We’ve sworn off our parents’ mistakes, read parenting books and consulted with counselors at the first sign of trouble.

We are determined to keep our offspring off the psychologist’s couch. But we may well be putting too much energy into keeping our children on track . . . that is, if it creates an energy deficit with our spouse.

I made a mistake early on in our marriage when I decided that since my husband was a big person, he could fend for himself. I made my daughter my first priority and focused on her needs.

Now I see that this thinking is flawed. It’s not a question of priorities. It’s a question of energy. A paradigm shift in parenting comes when a person realizes that families run on energy, not priorities. If you put all your energy into your children, you won’t have the energy reserves for your spouse, no matter how deeply you care for him/her.

So if you have a policy of “Children First” at your house, you should rethink it. When parents are too devoted to their kids, a space can grow between couples, and if untended, it can become a chasm.

Lots of couples lose touch over this one, so do a little family inventory. Do you engage your spouse in conversations with as much enthusiasm as your children? Do you consider your spouse’s feelings as often as you do those of the kids? Do you save energy for your spouse every day or do you meet up with him/her at the end of the day when you are depleted?

If you scored high for spousal displacement, make a paradigm shift in parenting and strive to balance your energy output.

Sleep is Heavenly

Sleep is heaven!

As I look out the window at the intermittent rain, I'm reminded of my scant night of sleep. Before I was married with kids I never thought much about sleep. I could get some whenever I wanted it. I could dream for hours on end without interruption. I could wake up slowly or not at all on the weekends.

Sleep was plentiful. It was really a non-issue in my life. But that was before I became a parent. A nocturnal animal.

In my current world sleep is a hot and rare commodity. Priceless. Sleep is coveted, bargained and fought for. It's a prize, a grand celebration and a pillowy extravaganza.

Staying happily married with kids when you're sleep-deprived is tough. When the kids are down and I finally begin to enter dreamland, if my husband starts to snore in my ear I cringe, I grope, I nudge him until he stops. My body aches for sleep. I don't care about him anymore. Survival is key. I need my sleep.

Now I know why sleep deprivation was a form of Nazi torture: It causes temporary insanity. And it certainly can play havoc with a marriage.

A great solution to this problem is letting the other guy sleep. It may seem ridiculous, but a key to staying happily married with kids can be as simple as once in a while letting your lover sleep. Here are some real life examples:

#1 One night I was utterly exhausted and the kids were still romping around the house at 9 p.m. My eyelids felt like weights. My husband took one look at my horizontal position on the floor and said, "Hon, it's OK. You look beat. Go ahead and go to sleep. I'll get the kids' jammies on, brush their teeth, read stories to them and put them down. You just go on and get some sleep." I looked at him with deep appreciation. What a kind and merciful husband I have.

#2 It was the crack of dawn on a winter Sunday morning and our 5-year-old stared at me only an inch from my eyeball and shouted:

"What's the plan for today, Mom?" She started pulling the covers off my toes, but I could barely utter a sound as my voice box was not functioning yet. My eyelids were still sealed shut. My husband looked at me and said, "You keep sleeping. I'll make breakfast start the coffee, deal with the kids. You just relax and sleep some more." This was truly rich. I could dream on while the music of the family began without me.

#3 Our kids had been sick for a few days. It was 2 a.m. and one of the kids was screaming. She had a double ear infection. I was searching like a madwoman all through the medicine cabinet for the children's Tylenol. I could barely keep my eyes open, but my husband was wiped out from the night before. I looked at him for a split second as he lay sleeping. I was hoping for some relief but then said, "You can keep sleeping. I'll take care of the baby tonight. I'll catch up with sleep tomorrow." He looked at me and grinned. He grabbed the pillow and rolled over. He was a happy man.

Just a footnote: Instead of fighting over sleep, challenge yourself to think of it as a gift to give. A stretch of sleep is the most kindhearted gift one spouse can give to the other.

Salt your Spouse's Plate

A wise old woman once said you should be so nice to your husband, that when he's eating dinner you should have the kindness to say, "Would you like a little bit more salt on that, honey?"

Ridiculous.

Or that's what the young woman thought who had sought out the wise woman's advice. What can a mom, depleted from the yelps of a baby, hope to give her husband? Nothing is the sane answer.

But the wise woman argued. She said that instead of worshipping the baby, a wife should be really kind and considerate to her husband. Always put that relationship first. Otherwise what is the point of having children, anyway?

I venture to say that if this wise old woman had been a wise young woman, she would have said each spouse should be so nice to each other that they salt each other's plate.

This image makes me smile. I often think of it when I'm trying to keep my marriage a priority with a little one nipping at my heels. It isn't easy. There are times I'd like to tell my dear husband to look after himself. After all, I already have child dependents.

But that's not the way it works in the best of families. The best of families are based on the trickle-down theory. In short, when Mom and Dad are united, goodwill trickles down to the children. When Mom and Dad take care of their relationship taking care of the children falls into place.

The truth is, we parents are overwhelmed by the family unit and sadly, instead of pulling together as a couple, we all too often lose sight of each other . . . for years.

We work too many hours. We forget to date each other. We even forget to talk to each other, aside from briefings on carpool schedules and what's for dinner.

Somehow, in the midst of bringing up baby, we can't muster the energy to have those deep meandering talks that last until 4 a.m. about the meaning of life and favorite one-liners. We simply forget to be with each other. And after years of failing to salt each other's plate—we can lose the best part of us as a couple.

It seems to us that if all couples had the fortune of hearing this wise woman and her point-blank blunt comments, they would realize that if they decide to have children it will be a challenge to hold on to each other—but nothing insurmountable.

People make a mistake when they conclude their spouse no longer needs tender loving care once they have a house full of kids. When you tend to your loved one and he or she tends to you, before you know it, you're both well tended.

As for the children? When Mom and Dad salt each other's plate, they salt everybody's plate.

The 15-Minute Rule

I never knew how completely exhausted my bones could be until I had a 2-year-old and an infant while holding down a teaching job. In those days, as soon as we'd get the babies to sleep, my husband and I would immediately want to vegetate. We'd end up staring at the TV for an hour or so. We didn't talk to each other. We barely acknowledged each other's existence. We barely made it down the hall to our bed, and we barely uttered a word before falling asleep.

It went on like this for a while. Sometimes it would vary. After the kids went down one of us would watch TV while the other would take a phone call, get on the computer, clean the kitchen floor. But we didn't talk. We were too wiped out to give anything to each other.

After a year of this, one night I sat up in bed at 2 a.m. and started crying. He said, "Oh, no, I don't have the energy for this kind of heavy talk at 2 a.m. We've got to get up early. Let's talk later."

I looked at him and said, "There is no later in our world. I need to tell you that I feel so alone, so isolated, so sad, so trapped by my obligations to the family. It's like we're roommates and I feel so alone." The strangest thing happened just then. He sat up and looked at me and started to cry. He said, "Well, you know, I feel exactly the same way. I feel trapped by my obligations, alone and disconnected from you."

We both realized that we had to become each other's best friend. We knew one thing for sure. The kids were not going to solve this problem for us. We needed to become allies or risk losing each other with two kids under the age of 5.

That's when we started the 15-minute rule.

Here's how it works. After we get the kids to bed—before we pick up that phone, touch a computer key, hit that TV remote or load the dishwasher—we sit down and we look at each other's face and we talk for at least 15 minutes every night, no matter what. (Barring a major flu of course.)

We talk about our day, our struggles, our challenges, what we ate for lunch, anything we want. But we each get a turn to talk and to listen.

We talk to each other for 15 minutes every day, and while this may not seem like a long time, people who live in a family filled with play dates, jobs, soccer, homework and P.T.A. meetings know that to have an uninterrupted 15-minute conversation is something of a small miracle.

At times it's a strain to keep our eyes open, but we talk until we have a chance to connect. During this time we typically sit close together. We're almost like two trained seals now who huddle up into a 15-minute pose once the kids go to bed.

We began this several years ago and we have rarely felt isolated or trapped since. It may not be a cure-all to talk daily, but it has greatly improved our relationship.

Of course it's a policy that requires some discipline. If I slip up and touch that remote or try to hide on the couch in front of an "I Love Lucy" rerun, my husband will come into the room and say, "Hey, aren't you going to talk to me? What about the 15-minute rule?" Or if he gets in that really comfy position on the living room couch and I see him going down for the count, I nudge him and say, "Hey aren't we going to talk about our day?" Or if

there's a hot basketball game on I'll say "Hey, what about the 15-minute rule?" And he'll say, "Oh I guess I can just catch that last quarter.

"Let's talk."

Be a Flasher

In the past few years I've taken up a risqué sport: flashing body parts. Of course I only flash my husband, and I'm a premeditated flasher. I am careful to strike only when my kids are out of sight.

Flashing has had an interesting affect on my husband.

He retaliates and flashes back. I was surprised by the playfulness this has unleashed in our marriage, a sneaky way to be sexy with each other in the family orbit.

Before we took up flashing, we compartmentalized our marriage with sex set aside for the off hours, when the kids were down for the night. But these days, when the kids aren't looking, we can steal a little sex—a flash, a pinch, a lingering wet kiss. Of course sometimes a flashing is interpreted as a full-out pass. Once when the kids were at the neighbors, I flashed my husband and one thing led to another, postponing dinner.

I think there is something to this flashing of body parts that triggers the sexual beast in all of us.

If you think it's not a good idea for mom and dad to let sexual feelings flow between them when children are wide awake and sometimes even in the next room, you're dead wrong. That twinge of sexuality creates intimacy, a good laugh and a lingering warmth that is good for children and other living things.

Once when my husband kept pecking my cheek, I struggled to get away and told my daughter to come rescue me, complaining that dad was loving me too much. She laughed a little as she came to my rescue. I saw that sheepish smile of hers and the blush beneath. I thought to myself, she gets a kick out of the fact that we're playful with each other. She picks up on the love between us.

Considering kids pick up on all the interaction between mom and dad—even when it isn't always so pretty—it's a good thing to let them know you have a loving relationship. That doesn't mean you let them witness a flash. But if they should witness a long, intertwined embrace on occasion, better that than a nasty argument.

Why not take up this risqué sport?

Sexual Favors

One evening when my husband was completely exhausted I asked him if he would clean the kitchen after dinner. He looked at me and said, "What's in it for me?" I said, "What do you mean? This is part of your job, dude." He then said, "Well how about a little oral sex?" I looked at him as if he'd gone mad, and then said, "Well, if you do the counter tops, the stove top and the fridge, mop the floor and do the dishes, you've got a deal."

When we exchanged vows I could not have fathomed bartering sex for a clean kitchen. But I never knew how exhausting parenting could be. Today I'm ready to cut all kinds of deals for a clean floor, a load of laundry or a foot massage. I'll stoop low for clean silverware. I'm a top-flight negotiator these days.

I know, I know, this seems like prostitution, like bad, bad, bad. But, you know, sometimes it's good to be bad. My husband often has pointed out to me, "Hey, you're my wife. If I can't ask you for what I want sexually, what

am I to do?" He's half joking, but he's also half serious.

My 64-year-old father told me something recently that surprised me. I know his wife, my step-mom, often nags him and drives him nuts. So I asked him, "What has kept you guys happily together for more than 25 years now? The sex must be real good," expecting no reply. And he looked directly at me and said, "You know, the funny thing is that, yes, the sex is very good, and you know, honey that counts for a lot more than you'd imagine." Then he laughed, but it was a serious laugh. He meant it.

And I got it. Sex means a lot to men and women, and we'll put up with noisy kids, poopie diapers, sleepless nights and messy houses with a smile if the sexual favors are happening, but happening good.