

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Family Night

axis

You Don't Have to Be a Superhero to Fight for Family Night

We think it's fascinating and perhaps telling that Pixar's [current highest grossing film is *Incredibles 2*](#). Pixar has created many excellent stories, but with *The Incredibles* franchise, the studio has done something brilliant: It has captured family life, with all its challenges and hilarity, in a relatable, clever, and appealing way.

Whether you're on family vacation or having dinner together, time with family can be uproariously fun or full of stress, crankiness, and conflict. No matter how hard it gets to find time to spend together (or to get along while you're together), family night is something to fight for! Trust us—you won't regret it.

— Why is having an intentional family night important?

If you were to ask the average parent, most would probably say it's tough to set aside family time. In our insanely busy culture, being together as a family takes work. In [Men, Women, and Worthiness: The Experience of Shame and the Power of Being Enough](#), research professor Brené Brown says that human beings are hardwired for belonging and connection. We know from God's word that family is the most foundational institution He created, before government or even the church. It's also arguably the main way we learn about God's character and how He relates to us ([Eph. 5:1](#)).

It's easy to let school, work, or other activities distract us from what really matters. Someone in our family could be experiencing something really awesome or extremely difficult, but if we're caught up in our own lives, we won't know what's going on with the people we love. If one parent works more than the other, whatever family time you have might be one of the few times your kids get to see that parent.

What's more, families shape our identities. If you can establish your own family traditions and routines, you'll not only strengthen your family bonds now, but you'll also build memories that you can look back on later. So being intentional in not only setting aside the family time, but also in how you spend it matters. Simply eating dinner in front of the TV each night then wandering off to bed at some point isn't actually spending time together (it's spending time with the TV...while being in the same room). But eating dinner while watching something you've agreed to watch together and then talking about it afterward is very different.

— Before we get into family night, what are good ideas for connecting day-to-day?

We think it's important for families to connect on a daily basis if they possibly can. Again, the busyness of life can make doing so incredibly difficult, and we encourage you to give yourself grace. But also be willing to ask yourself some challenging questions. When you look back on your life, do you want to see that you got a lot of things done at

the expense of spending time together? Or do you want to see that you prioritized the people you love?

Sharing a meal is one of the easiest ways you can spend time together as a family. Many families touch base during the day by eating dinner together. Lunch is probably too hard schedule-wise, but you could do breakfast if that works better for you. Even if you can only eat together a few times a week, guard the time that you do have. This will require some sacrifices, but those sacrifices are worth it. One friend of ours says her family did a lot of family dinners when she was growing up, and when she went away to college, those family dinners were what she missed most about being away from home. She never expected that.

Figure out your overall daily routine as a family, and see what you could do together that naturally fits within your schedules. One family we know takes 10 minutes every morning for a short Scripture reading and prayer time. They know that trying to meet for any longer is impractical, but they want to at least do something. Be realistic about what you'll actually accomplish even as you make space for that time together.

Again, you have to do what works best for your family and give yourself grace. One woman's dad had to work a lot while she was growing up, so her family would make a picnic meal and visit him at work so they could all have dinner together from time to time. The situation wasn't ideal, but since there was nothing they could do to change it, they worked with it. Plus, she says, it was fun for them to be with him in his space. If you're stuck in a difficult situation, don't feel like you're failing as a parent if it's hard to create regular family time. Do the best you can with the resources you have.

— How often should I have family night?

If you can manage it, it's good to have family night on a weekly basis. Every family is different, of course, so you'll have to do what works and what is reasonable for yours. Whatever you decide, the goal is to spend regular time together without putting an excessive burden on the family to make that happen. It's also important to find the balance between protecting that time together (like making sure everyone knows they can't schedule other activities on that night each week) and making sure not to be too legalistic about it (if something huge comes up for someone, maybe it'd be worth rescheduling to a different night or skipping that week if rescheduling isn't possible).

— What could we do during family night?

Do something around food

You could make a meal together with multiple courses and have each person be responsible for choosing and making one of the courses. Or you might have a night where you're the cook and waiter, and your kids get to pretend that they're out at a restaurant, ordering from your menu. Kids love using their imaginations, so this is a fun way to engage younger kids.

Watch a movie or a TV show

We know a family who would build a fort in the living room, order pizza, and watch

(and then discuss) a movie every Friday night. Another family has movie night on Sundays with popcorn and smoothies for a fun, easy meal. That time is something simple and restful that they can look forward to every week.

Be active, inside or outside

When you can't go outside, there are still plenty of ways to get creative! One family would play a silly game indoors with their dad when the kids were younger. He would have a soft toy (like a teddy bear) and try to throw it at the kids while they sprinted from one end of the living room to the other, trying not to get hit. They loved it. You could also do family hide-and-seek or have a family Nerf gun fight.

When you can go outside, take advantage and get away from the house sometimes. One family would take walks to a nearby park and play Frisbee or Frisbee golf, go on walks in the woods, or go on bike rides.

Get creative and spontaneous

We know a family who would collect change in a jar throughout the day. Every three months or so when the jar was full, they all went to the grocery store and used that money for fun purchases only—nothing useful. One time, the dad bought toy race cars, the daughter got a bunch of chocolate, and the mom found some unusually flavored Lays chips.

One couple made a tradition of [taking their kids on “surprise rides.”](#) Whenever they spontaneously yelled “surprise ride,” the kids would rush to get into the car. They wouldn't know where they were going, only that they were about to do something fun, like go out to a movie or get ice cream. Not only was the activity fun, but the spontaneity and anticipation of the trip made it even more exciting.

Incorporate a get-to-know-you question

At some point during family night, have everyone answer an icebreaker-type question. You could ask what people's favorite colors or animals are, or where they would go if they could go anywhere in the world. You never know what you might learn (since it's easy to assume we know everything about the people we live with and yet never talk about our hopes, dreams, aspirations, quirks, etc.)!

Splurge now and then

You probably want to keep family time inexpensive, but once in awhile, it's worth doing something that costs a little more and is different, like going to a trampoline park, batting cage, adventure park, or other local attraction.

Bring other people into your family time

Do something with another family, your neighbors, or your kids' friends occasionally. If you don't know your neighbors, you could bake something and give it to them, using the opportunity to introduce yourselves.

Let your kids choose what to do

Take turns with who gets to pick the family activity. This is a great way to give your kids ownership over your time together.

Guard your time

Set boundaries on your family time—like no devices. Do the cell phone stack, where you all put your devices on silent in a pile. The rule is that no one can check them during family time. You might also set boundaries for what you do and don't talk about, like

only being encouraging and saving other deep/hard conversations for another time so that family is always something everyone looks forward to.

More ideas:

- Play board or card games.
- Have a [campfire cookout](#) in the backyard.
- Play music together one night.
- Have a craft night.
- Read a book aloud together.
- Sit outside as the sun sets and identify the unique sounds you hear as night comes on.
- Create and film your own movie.
- Have a cooking competition.
- Have a painting night.
- Choose an experience [none of you have ever done before](#) and do it together.
- Camp out in the back yard or on the back porch.
- Go for pajama walks—get the kids ready for bed and then go on a walk together.
- If there's an eclipse or meteor shower that's supposed to happen, watch it together as a family.
- [Give each person a few dollars](#), exchange names, go to the mall, and buy gifts for the person whose name you drew. Then grab a small snack at the food court and exchange your gifts.
- Go to a local sports game or theater performance.

Keep in mind that while we want to offer you plenty of creative ideas, there's nothing wrong with choosing something simple and doing the same activity every week. After all, you want your time together to be restful and fun. If you're constantly feeling pressure to do something amazing and complicated, you'll likely end up putting an unnecessary burden on all of you.

Anything else we should do during family time?

It's healthy for families to have fun together, but it's not a bad idea to have “family meetings” now and then. You can address any issues you need to, tell your kids about new family policies, and check in on how people feel about how the family is structured.

Consider spending some of your time together doing a family service project. One friend of ours says that in her hometown there was a ministry where people could volunteer to organize and drop off groceries for people in need. What a great activity to do as a whole family! You could also volunteer to serve a meal together at a homeless shelter. If your kids are old enough and you feel safe doing so, you could take them to talk to homeless people in your town and use the opportunity to teach your kids how to pray with and share the Gospel with others.

Doing a service project together shapes your family identity, but goes beyond that as well. It gives your kids a vision for making a difference in other people's lives and helps them build a habit of serving others.

How else can I make family night a smooth experience?

Family time definitely comes with its challenges, and it might help you to keep a few tips in mind. Try to [take your audience into account](#). If you're doing a lot of activities that are aimed at young kids, your teens probably won't want to participate—and not just because they're acting like “typical” teenagers. As your kids age, it's important to do things that are compelling to them. If your kids' ages cover a wide range, getting your teens on board with helping you plan the evening could make them more willing to do things their younger siblings will enjoy.

If something always goes wrong in a certain scenario, figure out why it's going wrong and strategize for how to resolve the problem. For example, if you're always spending 30 minutes trying to agree on what movie to watch, take turns choosing. Or try this family's strategy: Have everyone pick a few movies they're interested in watching. Then put the DVDs in a pile (if you're considering movies online, you could always write the titles in a list and then cross them out). Each person then takes turns eliminating one movie from the pile. They can get rid of any movie they want. Whichever movie is left at the end will be the one you'll watch. With this method, everyone in the group has some ownership over the movie you end up watching.

What about when family time doesn't go as planned?

One woman's family is pretty argumentative. Growing up, it would usually be a toss up between whether they'd have an awesome time together or whether someone would get so angry and upset that the night would be completely ruined. One time they decided to play the board game Risk (players make and break alliances with each other while trying to conquer the world). She, her siblings, and her parents got so mad at each other because they were so competitive that the dad decided they would never play Risk again.

It's good that the dad wanted to avoid fighting, but it probably would have been better if the family could have eventually learned how to handle their conflict, instead of avoiding it. That being said, there are times when it's better simply to avoid scenarios where you know conflict will arise. You could pick an activity that is more team-oriented, instead of competitive.

Never forget the power of prayer. Possibly the most important advice we give in any of our guides is encouraging parents to pray. Ask God to use your family time to strengthen your bonds with each other and accomplish His will in your lives.

I've tried having a family night before, but it's never lasted very long. Any strategies for making it stick this time?

Adding *anything* to our schedules is always a battle. Often, unless it's mandatory, we

tend not to give it enough priority to make it stick. (Which is why so many people find it hard to stick to a regular exercise routine...) But it *is* possible to make it happen. We might just need to approach it differently.

We think the advice given in a recent email (sent 8/29/18) by Jon Acuff, [author of multiple books](#) including *Finish: Give Yourself the Gift of Done*, is so timely:

When it comes to our families or our friends, we tend to hope that things will just work out. How often do you set up monthly goals for your life outside of work? How often do you track dates with your spouse? How often do you make sure you're reaching out to friends? How often do you keep a checklist for your exercise program?

Just like it's hard to go from never exercising one week to exercising 5 or 6 days a week the next, it's difficult to go from never having set family time one week to committing one night each week the next. In fact, it may be even harder to do that than to commit to exercising because family night involves changing multiple people's habits, not just one person's. And it's even harder to make it happen if we don't track it.

Most experts agree that it's smart to set goals, then choose reasonable methods and increments for accomplishing that goal. So if your goal is to have family night one day a week, set a date in the future when you'd like to accomplish that goal. Then slowly work your way up to it and track your progress. Start with once per month for a couple months, then try every other week, then eventually get to one night per week. If you slowly work your way up to it, it won't feel like such a disruption and it'll get easier and easier to incorporate more often.

And if you don't achieve it by the set date or you miss a day every now and then, don't consider it a failure! Instead, use it as a chance to learn and reassess. Take time to analyze why you didn't make it by the prescribed date and then make relevant adjustments to your approach. Or, if you missed a day or two, figure out why. If it was because of something worthwhile, great! It means you had goals, but you were flexible enough to accommodate life as it happened. If it was because you forgot or didn't prioritize it enough, then take time to set new goals that address the issues and go from there. Whether it's exercise, relationships, family nights, or even our time with God, we build our habits through consistency and intentionality over time more than through being perfect.

Discussion Questions

- How do you feel about family night? Do you enjoy it? Do you think it's a good idea overall?
- What's been your favorite activity we've done as a family? What's your least favorite thing we've done?
- What's something you'd like us to do as a family?
- Would you be interested in planning family night some time?
- Are there any friends you'd like to invite to family night?
- If we did a service project together, what's something you'd like to do?
- Is there anything we've been doing on family night that you think we should change?

Recap

- Family time can be hard, but the family is foundational to people's identities and well-being.
- It's important to find ways to connect on a daily basis.
- Family night looks different for everyone. Find something restful you can regularly do, but don't be afraid to switch up your routine!
- Make time for family service projects and, if necessary, family meetings.
- You can be strategic in lessening the probability of tension and fighting during family night. But when people do fight, don't let that discourage you from spending time together in the future. Sometimes, consistency is better at showing your love for your kids than making each interaction perfect or memorable.

Conclusion

Whatever your struggles, don't give up on family night. Despite the apathetic attitudes they had when they were younger, many people we talked to are thankful for the work their parents put in to cultivating their family time. Even if you see no return on your investment right now, your efforts will likely bear fruit in the years to come. Keep up the good work!

Additional Resources

- "[MPMK Gift Guide: Top Picks for Family Game Night](#)," Modern Parents Messy Kids
- "[50 essential winter activities for the whole family](#)," Today's Parent
- "[Family Playtime: Great Ideas for Indoor and Outdoor Play this Summer!](#)" Modern Parents Messy Kids
- "[How to Get Your Family Active](#)," American Heart Association
- "[10 Kid-Friendly Volunteer Service Projects](#)," Points of Light
- "[25 service ideas for families with kids](#)," Famifi

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