

CHAPTER 4 - UTILIZE TOUCHPOINTS

At the end of a live event, a father with teary eyes told me he had always wanted to connect with his children consistently, but hadn't known how. He was short on time!

This father was gone each day working eight or more hours. When he came home it was difficult to connect with each child in a meaningful way. There was so much competing for his time in the few hours they had before bed. There was the deluge of homework, meal time and the chaos of getting kids to sleep. Not to mention his need for down time to unwind from a busy day.

What brought tears to this father's eyes was the comfort of knowing he could connect in meaningful ways with the time he had. He felt the information was life changing.

It's helpful to know and understand that moments of connection can happen during the daily activities we engage in already. It needn't be out of the ordinary or planned ahead. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate simple and practical ways you can connect with your children daily, in relatively short bursts of time, by recognizing and utilizing Touchpoints.

WHAT IS A TOUCHPOINT?

A Touchpoint is a point of contact between two people or entities. The word is usually used to describe contact between a buyer and a seller or a buyer and a product. We're going to use it this way: the point at which one person feels seen and heard by another person; when they know they matter. Most touchpoints happen daily and many require five minutes or less

In the Highlights magazine 2014 State of the Kid survey, here's what kids said they consider touchpoints with their parents.

"When it comes to finding focused time to talk to parents, kid's say the best time is during a meal (33 percent), closely followed by bedtime (29 percent) and in the car (18 percent)." "National Survey Reveals 62% of Kids Think Parents Are Too Distracted to Listen" <https://www.highlights.com/newsroom/national-survey-reveals-62-kids-think-parents-are-too-distracted-listen>

So let's begin with these three: mealtime, bedtime and car time.

TOUCHPOINTS WHICH OCCUR DAILY

TOUCHPOINT 1 - Mealtime

When I asked my children “What are your fondest and most meaningful memories of growing up in our home?” some of my kids said, “Eating together.” When it came to this one thing I was doggedly consistent. I had a large family, was active in community organizations and at church and I home schooled later on. I was busy! But when it came to meal time I was determined to make it happen.

"I had a friend whose family had dinner together every day. The mother would tuck you in at night and make breakfast in the morning. It just seemed so amazing to me."

Moon Unit Zappa, actress, comedian, sculptor and writer.

It wasn't perfect, but we talked. We laughed. We spilled milk together; we fell off our chairs together. We were a family together. Mealtime is one of my fondest memories also.

Dinner can be a time to reconnect and leave behind individual pursuits. It's a time to relax, recharge, laugh, and tell stories. You can catch up on the day's ups and downs while developing a sense of who you are as a family.

It's interesting that in American culture we treat meal time so casually, as if its main purpose is to get the food in and move on to more important things. We eat in our cars as we run errands. We eat standing at the kitchen counter, solo, not just busy parents but kids, alone. We hurry family dinners so we can get to the next thing.

As Cody C. Delistraty mentioned in his article “The Importance of Eating Together” from *The Atlantic*, “In many countries, mealtime is treated as sacred. In France, for instance, while it's acceptable to eat by oneself, one should never rush a meal. A frenzied salad muncher on the métro invites dirty glares, and employees are given at least an hour for lunch. In many Mexican cities, townspeople will eat together with friends and family in central areas like parks or town squares. In Cambodia, villagers spread out colorful mats and bring food to share with loved ones like a potluck.”

If we stop looking at eating together as one more thing on our long list of ‘to-dos’ and instead begin to consider it ‘sacred’ family time we’ll be better able to

pull it off more consistently.

It might not work out all the time, but what would work? Can you manage it four times a week? Two? Wherever you're willing to set your intention, make it happen consistently! Remember consistency, in simple things over time, is what ultimately brings significant results. But just so you know, most studies have found medium and high levels (i.e., 3 or more days per week) of frequent meals yield the most positive benefits for children.

REASONS TO EAT TOGETHER

Here's a list of reasons you might want to implement this particular touchpoint more regularly.

A. It will help you get what you want - Eating together goes a long way in helping you create the family culture you see in your mind or have written in a Family Mission Statement. (In chapter 7 you'll learn more about knowing what you want in your family.)

B. It will unify your family - The dinner table can be a place of unification. It can give your family a sense of belonging to something that matters. During the years when some of our children were making poor choices, the time at the dinner table held us together. If we couldn't agree on the best way to live we could at least gather once a day and eat together. It kept us face to face and heart to heart.

We didn't try to teach or reprimand during these meals. We stayed out of management and worked on the relationships. This effort didn't stop our children from making choices we didn't agree with but it kept our children bonded to us until they were ready to make changes. It kept us unified as a family.

C. You can de-stress - A family meal provides a chance to de-stress, to breathe and gives you space. If you determine that spilled milk and children falling off chairs are not interruptions and catastrophes but significant family life moments, then the dinner hour will bring you joy.

Even when mealtimes feel hectic or disorganized, they have long-term benefits for children because, if parents remain calm, kids aren't stressed by dinner time chaos. Remember they think and see like kids and not like adults.

D. You can build close relationships - Family mealtimes are opportunities to develop more intimate family relationships. Although families live together, we're

each going about our business of living independently of one another. We aren't all doing the same things each day.

When we eat together we have a few moments to reconnect, talk, laugh, and enjoy one another. Meals are a prime time for communication and understanding where we each are in our daily walk through life.

E. You'll have an improved sense of well-being - Anne Fishel, Ph.D. said: "Over the past 15 years researchers have confirmed what parents have known for a long time: sharing a family meal is good for the spirit, the brain and the health of all family members."

F. You can practice Being Present - Eating together gives you an opportunity to implement Present strategies. You can discuss a book the family's reading together. You could memorize a scripture or quote you like. You could tell jokes and laugh. Share what happened in the community or thoughts you had during the day.

When having a conversation, include everyone. Keep it positive. Avoid nagging, complaining, or controlling the discussion. Listen more than you share.

"One of the simplest and most effective ways for parents to be engaged in their teens' lives is by having frequent family dinners." Joseph Califano, Jr, of Columbia University

If up till now, dinner hasn't been a productive time to connect and build relationships with your kids, try playing a 'conversation' game. This game can get the flow going. Go around the table, and have each person share a high point of the day and a low point. Eventually, when done consistently over time, it will begin to feel safe, and your family members will open up more. This game is fun and you can practice 'seeing' and 'hearing' your children. You'll also notice Sparks.

Dinner's the perfect time to turn away from your technology. Turn off cell phones while at the table. Mute your land line. Even the ringing can be a major distraction. Turn off the TV! Having the TV on negates many of the benefits of a family meal and prevents you and your family from being Present with each other. The comfort of the food will make practicing this less painful.

Eating together is an opportunity to empty your mind of your endless to-do list and focus on your children. What are they saying? How do they look? What's their body language? What did you miss in the rush of getting out the door in the morning and as you moved through the day? Meal time is a perfect time to practice being Present.

G. You can give your kids T-I-M-E. If you need one more reason to eat together as a family ponder this: In a survey of more than 900 adolescents, 63 % said eating together as a family is important and 64% agreed that sharing meals brings families closer. These comments come from kids, just like your kids. They want and need time with you. They want your Presence, and one of the easiest ways to give it to the whole family at once is at the dinner table!

TOUCHPOINT 2 - Bedtime

Far too often bedtime feels stressful for both children and parents. A child isn't always ready to disengage from life and go to sleep. So they fight having to leave whatever it is they're doing and go to bed. Parents are weary from all they've had to manage during the day, and they want to get bedtime done and over so they can rest and have some peace.

Despite your weariness, if you switch your mindset, bedtime can become one of your most cherished moments with your children and a productive time for Presence.

It's like dinner time. What's the purpose? Dinner isn't just about eating and bedtime isn't just about sleeping. They're both touchpoints where we can connect and work on the most important relationships we have. Time invested here will pay huge dividends.

TWO EXAMPLES OF THE POWER OF BEDTIME

Example A - Let me share a poignant story with you. I know a mom whose fourteen-year-old daughter was cutting herself. The daughter was in significant pain, but the parents were clueless as to what the trouble was. Therapy had been ineffective, as the girl was unwilling to talk with anyone.

This mom took to heart the counsel to be Present at bedtime. Each evening she would go to her daughter's room after she was in bed. Mom sat quietly on the bed and touched her daughter, rubbing an arm or putting a hand on her back, for a few minutes. And she would wait. For the first few nights nothing happened.

However, it didn't take too long, and her daughter began to open up and talk. The three-minute nightly ritual turned into thirty.

This mom had things on her 'to do' list. She probably hadn't planned on giving an extra thirty minutes to one of her children each evening. But she felt immense relief at having found a way to break through to her daughter. Their situation is not healed. I suspect they have a long way to go. But taking time at the close of the day is paying dividends for this family.

Example B - Bedtime isn't always this dramatic, but it can always be this impactful. Let me share another example, much lighter in tone. When my son Barry was nine, he began asking me many questions. It became a bit overwhelming, and I needed a way to satisfy his need for answers and still keep my sanity. So I bought him a pocket notebook.

I told him to write down questions that came to his mind and at bedtime I would answer them. Often, after fifteen minutes of answers, he would still have questions on his list. So I told him to keep those questions safe in his book until the next night and to add any new questions. We continued this for almost a year.

Despite the hectic nature of my life at that time, this evening ritual was one of the most energizing experiments I ever entered into with any of my kids. I know it was impactful for Barry. It said what I could never have verbally said – "I see you. I hear you. You're on my list, in fact at the top of my list."

MAKING BEDTIME WORK FOR PRESENCE

It's not necessary to spend thirty minutes with each child or even fifteen; you can't and you won't. But make it a habit to give each child at least three good minutes. No feeling rushed. Let the mental agenda go. Whatever TV show is coming on will not matter to you ten years from now but the relationship you have with your child will. Lay or sit down by them. Touch them. Have a mini-conversation.

If you need to, set your child's bedtime a wee bit earlier to give you time for visiting and snuggling in the dark. When you make space for these safe, companionable moments, your child will be able to share feelings they're currently grappling with. Listen and hear. There's always tomorrow for problem-solving. Right now, in this three-minute space, you're busy working on the relationship. You'll be amazed at how much deeper it will begin to feel.

If you have youth even angry, belligerent, closed youth give this a try. Safe, quiet moments in the dark can be soothing. Often bedtime is the only time youth will

open up, so take advantage of it. And if they don't open up, it's OK. Be with them, give a random touch and be Present without a word being spoken.

If you have multiple children, and this feels a bit daunting to you have different nights for different children. Get both parents involved – divide and conquer! Snuggle with two kids on Monday and the other two on Tuesday. Then begin again. You might only be able to do one child each day of the week if you have lots of kids.

Avoid letting your mind get stuck on having this nightly routine with each child, every night. If you can do it, great! But if it's not possible, all is not lost! Remember simple things, done consistently over time, make BIG things happen. Consistency long term is the key.

If you give a few minutes to your child once a week, that's fifty-two times a year you make the effort to work on the relationship. If your child is ten you have eight years left with him. At once a week you will have given him 416 quiet, safe and Present moments. Even if you're not perfect (and you won't be) and miss a few of those nights, can you see how successful you could be, despite your imperfection?

Give bedtime some thought, focus on what you can do. What are you willing to commit to? Whatever it is, do it. Remember anything done consistently over time brings BIG results.

TOUCHPOINT 3 - Car Time

The twenty-first century's an incredible time to be alive. However, one of the results of life in this era is we spend lots of time in our cars. Adults tend to keep themselves company with the radio or CD's. We often use these tools to 'check out,' to block out the distractions coming from the back seat. But time in the car can be truly well spent when we use it as a place to be Present.

Isn't it interesting so many children listed car time as one of the top three times when they can get their parents attention? Possibly it's because we're all trapped inside a moving piece of metal, and there are fewer ways to 'check out.' Occasionally we have fine moments of connection. We can, by choice, have those moments happen more often.

CONVERSATION IS KEY

No matter whether you have one child or seven in your car, car time is a great time to throw out questions which help you hear what your kids have to say.

- What was good today?
- What are you looking forward to?
- Was anything disappointing?
- Was anything sad?
- What's something new you've heard about?
- Did anyone hear a good joke?
- What was the best thing for lunch?
- Look at the goofy sign!
- Don't you love that guy's coat?

You can make car time more successful if you remember:

- Keep questions from becoming lectures
- Accept all comments as valuable
- Listen more than you talk
- Stop trying to problem solve; just 'hear' and 'see'. Problem solve later
- Avoid pointing out one person's faults or errors
- Remember building relationships and practicing Presence is the goal

Car time can be the perfect time to bring up tough family subjects. The car's sort of neutral ground. You can discuss family schedules, family rules, the upcoming family vacation and what needs doing, family values, and so forth.

You're not trying to solve anything. You're working at 'hearing' your children. What are they saying? How are they feeling? Are your children on the same page with you or are there misunderstandings you pick up on that can be resolved later? What Sparks do you notice?

Relationships are built in everyday moments; the seemingly mundane and often overlooked. Car time is an excellent opportunity for practicing Presence, sharing, connecting and growing relationships.

“Turn off the cell phone and the radio when you're in the car and use that time to connect with your child. Try hanging a tag in your car that reads 'Here, now' or simply ask yourself over and over 'what am I aware of right now?'"

Mara Kormylo, mother of two, licensed clinical social worker and adjunct professor of Family Systems at Naropa University, Boulder, CO.

TOUCHPOINT 4 - Chores and Family Work

Thinking about the word WORK can make a parent groan inside, because work is often a point of contention in a family. But work can be a place where we create a touchpoint rather than a point of contention, if building relationships is our ultimate goal.

CHORES

Often we get so involved in the management portion of family life that it's difficult to address the relationship portion. We'll cover this topic in depth in chapter 9. For now, know that when we're Present things work out better.

Everyone wants support when facing a tough job. No one wants to be isolated in a mess. We sometimes forget our kids feel the same way we do.

Moms have had the experience of walking into a disaster of a kitchen after a long day. Your family's watching TV, and here you are, in this messy kitchen. Where do you start?

How does it feel when your husband abandons his show, comes in and begins helping you pick up? And how does it feel when he also asks you how your day went? It's amazing!

This happens to dads in garages and backyards. How does it feel when your seventeen-year-old volunteers to help get the backyard in order? How about when your thirteen-year-old offers to spend time helping you organize the garage? It feels better doesn't it?

When a child is faced with what seems like a daunting task, check on them. Put your hand on their back or rub a shoulder and say, "Let me give you a hand." Help them for 2-3 minutes while having a mini-conversation. Then head off to the next child or to your own work. It makes all the difference in how chores feel and in how well they get done. It solidifies relationships. It allows you to be Present with your child for a few minutes. Chores can be a touchpoint!

FAMILY WORK

Family work is another time when you can create a touchpoint rather than a point of contention. When working as a family we need to keep in mind the objective isn't just to get another item off the to-do list – we're creating relationships and bonding our family.

I love gardening alone. I love the quiet and feeling the dirt in my fingers. But I understand it's an opportunity for me to teach and connect with my grandchildren. Gardening can be transformed into an enduring memory for us all when I remember the garden isn't what's important, the relationship is.

Last year, I planned to paint a room in our house by myself but realized this was an opportunity to teach and connect with all the kids. We transformed painting from a chore into a wonderful memory.
"Build Relationship with Your Child", Clem Boyd,
Focus on the Family,

Add fun to any work you do as a family – sing, dance as you clean, play great music, tell jokes, laugh, have mini-conversations and lots of random touches.

Things aren't going to work out all of the time. You'll have family work that turns into chaos or contention. We're all imperfect, we get tired, and we have grouchy moments. It's inevitable. But what if you could make family work more pleasant even one quarter of the time?

If you can be Present as you work together even one quarter of the time, your family members will feel supported and relationships will be built. You'll experience GREAT results in the happiness level of your family.

TOUCHPOINT 5 - Transitions

Families have moments of transition during their day. A working mom or dad leaves the home and possibly leaves a child at day care. Kids go to school and come back again. Mom and dad go on a date. Youth go out in the evening. We all have transitions, and we have them multiple times a day. These are perfect moments to be Present. They're touchpoints. Here are three examples.

Example A - As a youth, when I left home, I would go out the door and yell "Bye Mom". From some far flung place in the house I would hear her call back "Bye Mary. Be safe." This scenario was repeated often.

There isn't anything wrong with this. But what if my mom had replied, "Wait a minute" and had come quickly to the door. What if she had looked me in the eye, smiled, laid a hand on my shoulder and said, "Bye Mary. Be safe." Can you 'feel' the difference? Can you sense the Presence I would have felt at sixteen? Do you think it would have made a difference for me?

Coming to see me off would have cost my mother something. It would have cost her T-I-M-E. Time is a precious commodity. This is why it's so powerful when we give our precious time to our children and are Present. There's an innate knowing that you have received a gift and it's valuable.

Example B - School is out. The front door bangs open and in charges three children. They call, "Mom, I'm home". Out of another door flies a mother. She begins chasing the children. They run around the living room squealing. As she catches them, she gives each one a big kiss and hug. These kids are six, nine and twelve. Finally they all fall onto the couch and talk over each other as they relate the day's experiences to their mom. She looks at them and smiles, making an occasional comment. Soon they scatter off to different parts of the house.

This scenario is repeated most days at the home of my friend, Kim. She's a work at home mom who runs a successful business. Daily, at the same time, she stops what she's doing. She prepares for the onslaught of coats, boots, book bags and kids. Then she participates in their 'catch and kiss' ritual and gives them her full attention. It takes around twenty minutes of her day, and it happens before her work day is finished.

For these twenty minutes, Kim is Present. It's a gift she gives to her kids. It helps them transition back into their family. It rekindles that 'family' feeling for all of them.

Example C - Let's say you're dropping your child off at daycare. As you drive you sing a favorite song. You look at your child in the rearview mirror, and they look back at you. You smile. You ask them "What's the best thing that's going to happen today?" and they tell you. You get to the day care. You open the car door, unbuckle your child and rub noses. You say, "I love you." They respond, "I love you," and you take them in.

Maybe they begin to cry. You sooth them, hand them to the aid and head out the door, but you feel Ok because you've had a few minutes of Present time together.

TRANSITIONS WITH YOUTH

When I was raising my children, I had many opportunities to use transition times to be Present with my youth. As our kids age, it gets more challenging to be Present because we're busy, and they're busy. They can seem distant. They may act as if they don't want to be with us.

When they return home in the evening or late at night is a perfect transition time to connect and help them ease back into the family. Be prepared to pay the price required to connect with youth – your T-I-M-E. Leave the TV, the ironing, the email and Facebook, and meet them when you hear the door open. Look at them and smile. Touch a shoulder. Say, "I'm so glad you're home. How did it go?" You may get nothing more than a quick "OK". That's alright because they'll feel your Presence. Now and then you'll get more. They will, in turn, be Present with you and share feelings. These can be precious, sweet and at times crucial moments.

This can also work in reverse when you're returning after a long day. My friend Tiffany has a teen-aged son. One day when she returned home from shopping he met her in the driveway and offered to carry in the groceries, an uncommon occurrence.

Although she was tired and anxious to get things put away and dinner started, she got Present. She watched her son as he carried in the groceries and paid attention to his body language. When the groceries were on the counter she asked, “What happened today?” Her son opened up and shared an experience which was bothering him.

My friend said, “I almost missed this opportunity because I was transitioning back home and I was tired and had an agenda. I’m so glad I stopped and got Present.”

Are you getting a sense of how you can use transitions to be Present? You won’t be able to do this all the time. You’ll run late for work. A work at home parent may have a deadline. You may miss a youth coming back. But as much as possible we should use transition times to be Present with our children. When we do, we build relationships, we bond our family, and, frankly, we’ll be happier.

TOUCHPOINTS TO ADD TO YOUR FAMILY

TOUCHPOINT 6 – Family Night/Meeting

“By making eye-contact, getting down to your child’s level, offering a touch, or using a tone of your voice that conveys a desire to connect genuinely, you disarm yourself. You make it possible to reach your child more deeply and truly move forward together.”

Hilary Flower, *Adventures in Gentle Discipline: A Parent-to-Parent Guide*

Many parents work at getting what they want by having a weekly meeting or activity. My church has encouraged this for many years.

When Don and I had a young family, we had a family night on and off. I hate to admit we didn’t take it as seriously as we should have. In retrospect, it would have been helpful to gather our family together consistently to have fun, to share family stories, to eat treats, to share values and so forth.

It’s easy to ‘check out’ from your family. Life is busy. It was busy back in the day, before computers and cell phones, and it’s gotten busier. I would think about our family night but put it off for the laundry’s sake, the garden’s sake, a friend’s sake, time to myself sake, and I haven’t prepared anything’s sake. But when you consistently gather your family together you send a powerful message that your family matters more than anything else.

Let's look at two significant reasons to make the effort to gather your family together weekly.

A. Practice Presence - This family gathering time is a perfect place to practice being Present; to shut out the world, to actually 'see' and 'hear' your children and to show them they matter to you.

You have the opportunity to shut off all of the technology for a short time and focus on your children. You put work on hold – the 'outside of the home' work and also the 'inside of the home' work. When you do this, you clear the agenda out of your head. You make your family, being with and enjoying them, the agenda.

I remember hearing a story once, told by the son. His dad was a successful man and in high demand. The circus was coming to town, and he had promised his boys he would take them. During dinner on the night of the proposed trip, the father received a call. The boys were relieved to hear their father respond, "I'm sorry, I can't come. I have an appointment." This father said loud and clear to his sons, by his actions, "I see you, I hear you, you matter to me!"

B. Create your family culture - While a family mission statement can provide the big-picture vision for your family, regular family night/ meetings are how you take your vision and turn it into action. It's the doing part of the equation.

Remember a healthy family culture doesn't just happen (We'll cover family culture in more detail in chapter 7). Weekly family night/meetings are an effective way to reinforce your family's culture and values. They offer opportunities to teach the principles you want to instill in your children, as well as discuss how to apply them in real-life situations.

Teaching and connecting with your kids is why you take the time to decide what you want. A weekly evening together is a rare opportunity, in a chaotic and busy world, to implement what you've decided.

When I presented this information, one mom responded, "I guess that means we have to be on our game and not tired and annoyed with our kids when we go into these family night/meetings. Wow. Not sure how to bridge the gap." Stefanie M. (We will talk more about nurturing yourself in Chapter 12.)

She's right, gathering your family together can be a bit exhausting and chaotic at the end of a long day. So what can we do? If we remember enjoying our family 'IS' the agenda we'll manage better. If your family night/meeting is going South, shift gears. Throw out your notes. Stop trying to accomplish anything. Sing a song, play a game, roughhouse on the floor or go for a walk. You can even troop into the kitchen for lemonade. Then try again next week.

A FEW MORE 'ICING ON THE CAKE' REASONS

C. Family solidarity - Gathering together weekly will help establish a firm foundation of solidarity for your family. Dedicating time each week to play together, teach, and plan helps families withstand the storms of life. It gives your children a clear sense that they have a support group they can count on.

D. Resolve problems - When we're all together, it provides a family the opportunity to talk and resolve problems.

E. Teach skills - These weekly family night/meetings are a chance to teach skills which will serve your children well and help them develop into contributing members of society. By taking part in regular family night/meetings, your kids will pick up valuable life skills: problem-solving, planning, conflict resolution, and communication, for example. Letting kids teach a short lesson or lead a discussion helps them practice teaching and public speaking skills.

You can also dedicate this family gathering to teaching specific life skills: how to budget, how to take care of a car, how to civically engage, how to write a letter, how to sew on a button, proper manners, and so forth.

F. Get in sync - At this gathering, you can reduce the stressors which occur in most families. You can sync calendars and get your family on the same page concerning what's going on in the household.

MONITOR YOUR EXPECTATIONS

When Don and I had our family evenings, we would become discouraged because they didn't always turn out as we planned. There were always the yawning teens, the arguing 10 and 12-year-olds, the chaotic and noisy little kids, as well as an occasionally crying infant. Yikes!!

Family is much more than a word, it's a feeling of warmth and love that neither time nor distance can change.

Keep expectations from getting in the way of enjoying your family. Avoid the trap of giving up because, well, what's the use, what can they possibly be getting out of this? Keep the perfect from becoming the enemy of the good. The point is not what you teach, how well it looks, but being together while you're Present.

Even if your family night/meetings seem chaotic, there's still value in holding them. You'd be surprised how much your kids are picking up during the chaos. I've passed from having kids at home to having adult children with families of their own. I know they appreciated those evenings together because many of our children now have these same types of evenings with their kids.

I've sat in on their family night/meetings and have seen the gamut from utterly chaotic and "I am never going to do this again," to "Wow, can you believe how well that went. We have to keep doing this." And they do keep doing it regardless of the individual outcomes, because the cumulative effect, over time, will bless their family. And family night/meetings can bless yours too!

ORGANIZING A FAMILY NIGHT/MEETING

- Lead and stay Present
- Shoot for once a week
- Make it a priority – keep it sacred family time
- Have an agenda your family members can count on i.e. opening, teaching, ask what is working, who needs help, sync calendars, have fun, treats, etc.
- Have reasonable expectations
- Keep it simple
- Ask for weekly feedback
 - What was successful in our family this week?
 - What went wrong in our family this week?
 - What will we work on this coming week?
- Avoid discussing individual problems or grievances. You'll have time later and in private.
- Be flexible, vary the length depending on ages, and get everyone involved.

Family night/meetings help you send the message to your children that they matter and help you accomplish the goals in your Family Mission Statement. (You'll learn how to write a Family Mission Statement in chapter 7)

Thoughtfully consider and determine what you can and are willing to do and what will most effectively benefit you and your family. Then be consistent!

TOUCHPOINT 7 - Family Reading Time

From Scholastic's Kids and Family Reading Report, we learn only 17% of parents of kids aged 9–11 read aloud to their children. Yet 83% of kids aged 6–17 say being read to is something they either loved or liked a lot.

One of my warmest memories is of my mother reading poetry to us. She didn't read to us often, but when she did it was magical for me!

As I think back on those reading moments with my mom, I know what made them so special. I knew my mom loved us. That's why she was reading to us. I just knew in my little girl heart this was true.

MAKING FAMILY READING WORK

The number one reason to read to your children until they leave your home and go out on their own is to establish an intimate experience filled with feelings of warmth and belonging.

There are many ways to find time to read as a family. Each family will find what works best for them. You may have to try a few things out but go ahead and experiment. Snuggle together in the family room before the little ones go to bed. Have a Sunday morning or afternoon reading time. Have dad read at the kitchen table before dinner. Read right after breakfast, before everyone heads out for the day.

Reading as a family can last past the time children begin to read on their own as long as you're choosing books a notch above the readers in the group. You want to challenge your older one's thinking, open a door to discussion and create the possibility to broach difficult topics if needed.

The question arises as to how you keep the little's engaged if you're reading to engage the older youth? I found my Presence, warm snuggles, pillows and popcorn did the trick. For small children, cuddling with mom and dad and feeling kinship with older siblings goes a long way to keeping them engaged. Another tip is to allow them to do quiet activities which require no help from any one else: coloring, stringing beads, Lego's, etc. Even if they seem deeply engrossed in these activities they will be hearing more than you know.

Some families read every day. Others read a few times a week. There are those that have a once a week routine. It isn't as important how often you read as that you do read, consistently, and that while you're reading you're Present with your family.

WHY YOU SHOULD READ AS A FAMILY

There are many reasons to make the effort to read together. Here are a few:

A. Physical closeness - Reading aloud gives you and your children an opportunity to achieve physical closeness. Small children enjoy sitting on your lap or draping themselves across your body.

You may snuggle less with older children, but this is not a given. If you're open to having older children sit next to you or lay a head on your shoulder the chances are it will happen often. That has been my experience.

B. Sense of security - Gathering together as a family and reading creates a sense of security and safety – a feeling of 'all's right with the world'. When children feel secure and safe, they function better out in the world. Love is important to a child, but feeling safe is as important and often, even more important.

C. Sense of belonging – There's a sense of belonging which comes from everyone being in the same room, snuggling and listening to the same story, having a shared experience. This can be especially helpful as our children begin to mature. They're trying to figure themselves out as well as figure out where they fit in the world. This process of personal growth can bring a sense of isolation. Reading as a family is one of the ways parents can create a sense of belonging.

D. Tackle difficult subjects - Reading as a family allows you to introduce difficult subjects to your children and have 'safe' discussions. I've read books to my children dealing with honesty, integrity, kindness, bullying, God, and social issues, beliefs, and feelings. It made it possible to bring up ideas and thoughts I wanted my children to consider and ponder on. It was a safe and comfortable way to experience great life lessons.

"When you talk about a book together, it's not a lecture, it's more like a coach looking at a film with his players, going over the plays to find out what went right and what went wrong." Jim Trelease, author of *Read-Aloud Handbook*

E. A shared language and a sense of intimacy - When families read together, they often create a unique language. It can provide inside jokes. I read an article which described the experience of a family who loved the Mercy Watson books. In their family, they frequently heard the call at breakfast for "Mercy Watson toast, please!"

I queried the families I've worked with, "What quotes and phrases do you use in your family?" Here's a sampling:

- Is your (choice) taking care of building your 'character house'? from *Little Britches* - Colleen C.

- From the Phantom Tollbooth - 'Are you jumping to conclusions' for my son who freaks out before he knows what's going on. -Christine O.
- 'No Fighting, No Biting.' From the title of the easy reader No Fighting, No Biting by Else Holmelund Minarik - Theresa R.
- 'Don't contradict'. Something Ma and Pa say to their kids in the Little House series from Laura Ingalls Wilder - Darla S.

It's fun, as well as bonding, when families share a phrase from a good book which means something to all of them. It creates a sense of intimacy.

F. It can strengthen struggling children and youth - When one of my daughters was fifteen she was making unwise choices. She knew it, but was struggling to make changes. At the time the youngest two children read with me. We read in the middle of my bed before lights out. Although my daughter wasn't usually home, I noticed when she was, she would come to my bedroom door, lean against it and listen, no matter what the book was.

This did not resolve her issues and she had a tough road ahead but I'm certain it helped her stay connected to our family in a way that was vital to her eventual success.

I worked with a single mom who was struggling with her children ages eight, eleven and fourteen. They were argumentative and disobedient. One of her sons was withdrawn, and other people commented on how hyper her kids were. There was a fair amount of chaos in the home. She wanted to learn to be more consistent in her life. I suggested she experiment with reading as a family regularly. She was doubtful it would be successful but decided to give it a try.

As she began reading aloud to her children, it didn't appear it was going to work out well. The kids were restive and quarrelsome. But I encouraged her to keep it up no matter how it looked or felt because the goal was to practice consistency. Her job was to provide a comfy spot and to read, no matter how her kids behaved. So she did.

She committed to reading to her children twice a week. They would all gather in her room, in the middle of her bed and they would read. It wasn't always easy but as time went by it became more and more enjoyable. The surprising part is there began to be a sense of cooperation and peace while they read together and this feeling moved into other areas of their lives.

They felt it at meal times, in conversation, when working together. People began commenting that her children seemed more patient and calm. Her withdrawn child seemed happier and had begun to sing around the house. The family's problems didn't vanish away and life wasn't a bed of roses, but change was happening. Her family culture was changing for the better.

If you're struggling with any of your children, for any reason, the closeness generated by reading together can go a long way to keeping you connected while issues are worked out. Reading together is comforting.

TOUCHPOINT 8 - Daily Devotionals

Family devotionals are valuable for families of any religious faith and for families who don't ascribe to any religious faith. I realize the word devotional connotes a religious belief so if the word doesn't fit your family, call it something else. Each morning at one of my daughters' homes you can hear the call, "It's time for 'Good Morning'." The family knows what that means and they come running.

One of the synonyms for devotion is 'reverence'. A definition of reverence is 'to treat with respect'. Whether you're a religious family or not, it's of great value to teach your children to respect the family. Your devotional can help you accomplish this. Devotionals are shorter than a family night/meeting. They usually last less than fifteen minutes and can be as short as five. A family devotional is your opportunity to call your family together daily before they all scatter for school, work, etc.

Here are possible components for family devotionals:

- Prayer
- Reading a classic book
- Sharing the best thing that happened the day before
- Sharing each person's schedule for the day
- Reading out of your spiritual canon
- Memorizing a verse of scripture
- Reading the family mission/vision statement
- Sharing a thought
- Memorizing a quote
- Watching a short online video (4 minutes or less) emphasizing how you want to behave as a family or as people
- Watching a short video story from your spiritual canon
- Singing a hymn or children's song
- Discussing what you're reading, what you're watching or memorizing

It's not as important what you do as that you do it consistently and have a predictable structure. The younger your children, the more important the structure. Children like to know what's coming next. They feel safe when they can depend on things happening regularly, in a predictable way.

When planning the elements of your devotional, take into consideration the ages of your children. If they're all under five, your devotional will, by necessity, be simple and short.

If you have youth, it may contain more complex elements and be a bit longer. Then again, if you have youth with busy schedules, it may be as short as those who have children under five. You determine what's going to work best for your family, and then be consistent.

Family devotionals are effective in the morning but can happen anytime during the day. What works best will depend on your children's ages and your family's schedule. But whatever time you choose, you want the whole family together on a fairly regular basis.

If the family schedule changes and one person would miss the devotional consistently, then you need to find a new time slot for it. You want everyone to be there as often as possible; experiment to see what works best.

One important caveat - have your devotional when you have it planned even if someone is going to be gone. As your children get older, they may miss a devotional occasionally.

Other things may change, but we start and end with family.

IN SUMMARY

Eating together, bed time rituals, time in the car, chores and family work and transitions give you plenty of opportunities to connect daily. You needn't plan and carve out extra time. You can take advantage of these moments to be Present and build solid relationships with your children.

Reading together, family night/meetings, and daily devotionals are touchpoints you can implement into your family without a big time commitment or a lot of pre-planning.

Remember, you get to choose to have touchpoints in the daily affairs of life or points of contention. It's always a choice.

Becoming a Present Parent: Maximizing Presence in Less Than Five Minutes

As you work on being Present in your relationships with your kids, it will cease to be about what you 'do' for them. It will become 'how' you are when you're with them. That's when your relationships will take off and soar.