

CHICAGO PARENT

When couples collide

by Dawn Reiss

Let's be honest: There's no such thing as a perfect romantic relationship. Throw kids into the mix, a professional career or two, lack of sleep and it's a recipe for disaster.

There's plenty to fight about. Sex. Money. Who's going to change the diaper at 3 a.m.? Who's going to stay home from work with a sick child?

So how do couples deal with the conflict, and more importantly, make time for each other in the busy world of parenting? A few Chicagoans and experts offer their advice on how they make things work.

As a high school principal at Rudy Lozano Leadership Academy in Blue Island and the mother of two, Christine Diaz, 31, has a lot to juggle. Add in her time spent trying to earn a master's degree from Northeastern University and it's amazing she has any time for herself or her husband.

"We live a very hectic life," says Diaz, who has two children, Christian, 3, and Giselle, 18 months. "It's easy to be superficial. You go home, make dinner, the bath, put the kids to bed and you're knocked out. It's easy to grow apart. If you don't make the time, your marriage is going to go down the tubes."

Even though it's difficult to get a babysitter, Diaz says it's important to set a date night at least once a month. They try to make it something they can both look forward to such as going to see a play, going to dinner and a movie or a salsa club.

Talking about the potentially divisive issues also is key.

Diaz knew that getting her husband to take the initiative around the house, such as giving the kids a bath and changing diapers, would give her time to go to graduate school and finish her homework. So Diaz brought up the topic with her husband.

"For a man to change Pampers in his family, it's like I'm committing the ultimate sin," she says. "But I had to bring it up."

There are still disagreements about parenting, from when the kids should stop using a pacifier to why Diaz's mother-in-law shouldn't give junk food to the children. When a topic becomes a disagreement, Diaz says they try to deal with it right then and there.

"We usually argue back and forth and sometimes take a break if things aren't getting resolved," Diaz says.

Debra Mandel, a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles, recommends setting up two hour-long "speaker-listener" sessions. Mandel suggests that one person shares everything on their mind for an hour, while the other person listens, without interrupting. A few days later, after the listener has a chance to digest everything, they switch roles.

"The listener has to listen and not defensively," says Mandel, author of *Your Boss is Not Your Mother* and *Dump that Chump*. "The person who is listening has to be willing to think through what the other person is saying. Couples who tend to get into trouble and argue deteriorate into name calling and become overly sensitive to criticism."

Instead, Mandel suggests avoiding sarcasm, keeping a sense of humor and telling your partner what you appreciate.

"Keep in mind that most things aren't as much of an emergency as they seem in the heat of the moment," Mandel says. "Put things in perspective. Don't fill in arguments with past resentments. If you have a past resentment that isn't resolved, bring it up in a different time, don't trump your partner's concerns."

Mandel also recommends keeping in mind that men and women usually have different views on what quality time together means.

"Men need to understand women need to talk and that's quality time for women," Mandel says. "Men like doing a task together where there's not necessarily a lot of talking. A good relationship is not always one where the couple is always talking. A woman needs to recognize her honey doesn't always want to talk but that doesn't mean he doesn't love her."

For Catrina Bolin, 26, and her husband Andre, 32, who live in Avalon Park, it's hard to make time for each other with three children, Arianna, 6, Cheyenne, 3, and Andre Jr., 2.

"We don't get out much," Catrina says with a laugh. "So Blockbuster is our friend. We are on a first name basis."

To make time for each other, Catrina, a stay-at-home mom, makes sure she is by the phone so her husband, who is an ironworker for a construction company, can talk to her on his scheduled breaks at 9:15 a.m. and noon and at 4:20 p.m. when he is riding the train home.

"It's weird—I never thought it would be like this," she says.

Once a month the couple will have a grandparent or aunt take the kids.

"Having quality time is all in planning," Andre says. "If you're not good with planning, allow the other person to set something up. It's about making a commitment."

San Francisco-based relationship expert Adryenn Ashley agrees, saying not making time can do more damage than one might think.

"It's a slow creeping kind of virus," Ashley says. "When it starts off, you don't have those daily conversations asking how was your day and you start losing intimacy. It starts eroding because everything else takes priority and a little resentment builds up because you're not having couple time. It's not the quantity of time, but the quality of time, which means it's not when the baby is screaming in the background and you're just trying to get through the conversation so you can sit down."

Taking at least 15 minutes a day to talk one-on-one like the Bolins do is a great way to keep couple intimacy, Ashley says. Her other piece of advice: decide on a parenting style early on.

"You have to be flexible as a parent," Ashley said. "As a couple you have to make joint decisions. Have those parenting style questions before you have the issues, because it's the No. 1 thing that kills a sex life; if one does time outs and one does spankings and you're constantly fighting about it."

Both Ashley and Andre and Catrina say having positive couple communication is not only critical but crucial to creating a happy home.

"Find out what makes the other person tick," Andre says. "If you see a certain thing, a certain way you know how the person will take it, learn from it."

Dr. George Walker, 29, and his wife Brandy, 27, who live in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood, have always loved being spontaneous. They eloped to Las Vegas last May, booking the 6 p.m. flight that afternoon, despite having a large Chicago wedding planned. A little over a year later they have a baby, Miles, who is nearly 4 months old and has changed their life.

They still do some traveling but don't go out to eat as much. Small things, like her husband leaving notes on the computer saying that he loves or appreciates his wife, helps Brandy get through the sleepless nights of being a new mom. She makes his favorite meal or rubs his feet to show her affection.

Since they love traveling, the couple takes frequent trips to Indianapolis where his family lives, so they can go out alone on dates. They also paid for Brandy's father to travel with them when they fly to Seattle for an upcoming wedding.

"It's more expensive," Walker says. "But it's worth it to us, just to be able spend time together."

Tips for togetherness

Alan Allard, a psychotherapist based in Atlanta, offers his suggestions on how couples should make more time for each other and deal with arguments.

- Be honest that making time to be a couple is a priority. "Oftentimes couples are avoiding each other with kids and the commute, because it is not high enough on the priority list. If a couple really wants to find time together, they will find it. People find time to eat, to sleep and to go to work. Most often when parents aren't spending time together they're not wanting to enough."

- Be proactive, plan ahead. Capitalize on the time you do have, even if it's only 15 minutes. Instead of complaining how you don't have enough time together, focus on the time you do have together. Plan a date night interesting enough that both of you can get excited.

- Leave the past in the past. "Ninety-nine percent of arguing is what they don't like, what's been happening. That's a dead end street." Sit down and talk in terms of a positive outcome. If you're complaining about sex, don't talk about how you're not having enough. Instead talk about what you'd like to have happen.

- Focus on a solution. For example, if the wife wants to hire more childcare so they can go out and the husband says they can't afford it, the wife needs to show how hiring childcare benefits him, too. Or if the husband wants more sex and his wife doesn't, he may need to build more of a rapport with his wife. He needs to find out how she will think having more sex is in her best interest.

- If you're caught in a cycle of arguing, get out a video camera or tape recorder and turn it on. By doing this, you are more likely to be aware of how you are speaking to your partner and will learn, once the tape is played back, how to be more aware of the faces you both are making or the tone you are using.

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