

Summer Survival Strategies For Parents by Don Lasell, M.A.

Spring has sprung and summer is almost upon us. Near are the days when school will be let out and our children will be home for the summer. For some, this is a time of joyful anticipation. Vacation schedules are arranged, long awaited holidays are planned, and preparations are begun. For others, the anticipation may be somewhat less than joyful. Visions of chaos, noise and perpetual untidiness come to mind. Choruses of "I'm bored, what can I do" never seem to end. Long awaited is that first Tuesday after Labor Day when the children return to school and life returns to normal.

As a parent of four children, two with special needs, I know from first hand experience that the demands of daily living can often seem overwhelming. Life seems to move too fast, keeping one's head above water is sometimes the best we can do. Under these circumstances, survival is itself a monumental accomplishment.

But there are other times, times when the dust has settled a little, when the storm has past, and at least for the moment, we are able to catch our breath. It is at these times that we are able to reflect upon our circumstances and consider other possibilities; other ways to better manage life's challenges.

Listed below are a few thoughts and suggestions to reflect upon during those moments when there is a lull in the storm. Hopefully some will be helpful in making your summer a more enjoyable and fulfilling experience.

1. **TAKE CARE OF YOUR SELF.** As the saying goes "you can't give what you don't got". Being a parent is a demanding job. In order to effectively and consistently look after the needs of your family, you must regularly attend to your own needs as well. It is insufficient to attempt to find time for your self only when opportunity arises, you must make time for your self on a regular basis by scheduling it into your week. Sit down with your planner or calendar and schedule time for yourself within each week through-out the summer before writing in any other commitments. Make self-care a habit. Remember, recreation is re-creation.

2. **NURTURE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.** Relationships are like flowers, if they are left unattended for too long they wither and die. This is especially important in a marital relationship. Children's sense of security is closely tied to the stability they perceive in the relationship between their parents. The marital relationship also serves as a model for the children as to how they ought to relate to the opposite sex. Just as with scheduling time for self-care, one must also schedule weekly couple time. When couples take time to nurture their relationship, they strengthen the family as a whole.

3. **SPEND ONE TO ONE TIME WITH EACH CHILD.** Spending one to one time with each child is an investment in your relationship with that child. During that time valuable rapport is built. Opportunities to discuss issues, which might not otherwise be mentioned, also occur. Children learn to look forward to their "date" with Mommy or Daddy. Other benefits often result from this one to one time as well. Given the opportunity to choose the activity to be done during the date (within predetermined guidelines concerning the limits of time and money) children quickly become aware of the value of time and money, especially under circumstances in which it impacts them directly. Such awareness can be helpful when Mom or Dad want to have time to themselves or with each other. By making time to spend with each child on a one to one basis, the message "you are worthwhile and important to me" is conveyed. This message goes a long way in building children's confidence and sense of self worth, while also reducing the apparent need children often have to seek attention in inappropriate and often frustrating ways.

4. **HOLD WEEKLY FAMILY MEETINGS.** Family meetings serve several purposes. They create a very effective forum to plan for future activities, delegate responsibilities and deal with problems, and differences before they get out of hand. They provide an opportunity to develop children's leadership, cooperation and problem solving skills. They save a great deal of parental time and energy by dealing with at once, all the problems which occur through-out the week. They create commitment to the decisions made within the meeting by virtue of the fact that all present have had a part in the decision making process. These meetings also provide a very positive and encouraging way to deal with the relational challenges that occur in families. Family meetings are easy to implement and take relatively little time to conduct.

5. **CREATE A SUMMER SUPPORT NETWORK.** Other families are in the same boat, why not pair up and go on joint outings together, or tag team by taking turns looking after each others' children so as to give each other a break. It's amazing how cooperative and well mannered our children can be for other people. Joint outings are a great way to get a little adult company while also providing the kids with a welcomed break from the usual routine. By working together, we lighten each other's load while also modeling the value of cooperation for our children.

6. **HAVE THE COURAGE TO BE IMPERFECT.** This phase, coined by Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs, puts into perspective the tragic tendency so many of us have to avoid trying new things. We miss out on so much because we fear the pain associated with failure. But as parents, our willingness to try new things and risk failure, models an important quality of character for our children (courage) while also conveying to them a sense of our authenticity and credibility as parents and people. Use the summer vacation as a time to try new things with your children. You will expand them and yourself in the process and maybe have some fun doing it.

7. **REMEMBER WHAT IS IMPORTANT.** So much demands our attention. It is easy to get stressed out trying to keep up with everything that needs doing. We can get so used to dealing with crises and putting out brush fires that we overlook, or perhaps even forget about, what is really important. In the final analysis, how important will it be that one had an immaculately tidy home or that one acquired that long sought after promotion, only to have lost the opportunity to nurture a relationship with one's child before they entered their turbulent adolescent years? Many parents take for granted the relatively quiet and stable time in a child's life before they enter puberty, only to find themselves wondering what happened to their sweet children as they have entered their teens, gotten mixed up with the wrong crowd, and become someone their parents no longer recognize.

Summer vacations, though often stressful, are also a time of opportunity. With pro-active planning and a small investment of time, the moments we spend with our children over the summer can provide a wonderful opportunity for personal and family growth, while also creating memories we can cherish for a lifetime.

Don Lasell, M.A.
Registered Clinical Counsellor