

# Tuesday is our family night!

by Dean Merrill

**My wife and I** set out to have two children and wound up with three, when the second pregnancy turned out to be twin girls. In the early years, we were both so busy changing diapers and tugging with snowsuits that we thought only fleetingly about spiritual development. We read them bedtime books about Jesus, of course, and sprinkled the days with Christian music, but as far as any overall plan was concerned, we hardly had the energy to consider that on top of everything else. There would be plenty of time later on.

What finally bumped us off dead center was to have Nathan, our firstborn, trot off to kindergarten one fall and strike up a friendship with Derek, who lived on the other side of the block. Derek's family belonged to a non-Christian religious sect. My wife, Grace, made

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the mistake of calling his mother one day and inviting Derek over to play the following Monday.

"No, Derek isn't free after school on Mondays," Mrs. Van Orden kindly replied. "That's our family evening. All the children go to the temple for clubs in the late afternoon, and then we spend the evening together as a family. How about a different day?"

That did it. I was not going to be outtaught by people I felt were seriously mistaken in their faith. It was time for me to put my actions where my convictions were as a Christian father.

Grace and I invited the Van Ordens over for dessert one night, quizzed them about what they did on Mondays, and then proceeded to lay our own plans. Advent was approaching, and it gave us the launch we needed, as each week we gathered around the wreath, lit the candles, and talked and sang about Jesus coming to earth. When

January arrived, we simply kept going with a weekly time together.

Nathan is now a sixth grader, and Rhonda and Tricia are in second grade. "Home Together Night," as we dubbed our evening, has been part of their lives for as long as they can remember, sustained by the following beliefs:

- That modern families are split up most of the week, each person going separate ways, and families need to be *together* at least a few hours each week to preserve unity.

- That a child's spiritual input ought not to come entirely from outsiders. Thank God for pastors, Sunday school teachers, Brigade leaders, and all the rest—but their efforts skip past a question that lurks in the mind of every child: *I wonder what my dad thinks of all this? Preachers and teachers are supposed to spout all this God stuff—that's their job. But do my folks buy it?* Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and Ephesians 6:4 are clear that parents and particularly fathers are to do some of the teaching themselves.

- That kids are worth a block of uninterrupted, quality time each week.

- That Christian teaching doesn't have to be boring. It can be alive, effective, and can blend well with other forms of family sharing.

- That the generation gap can be bridged if we really care and are willing to reach out. The words of Derek's father keep echoing in my mind: "The prophets of our church have promised us that if we give our children this time each week as they're growing up, we won't lose them when they're teenagers. We will have built up a bank of trust to carry us through the stormy years."

- We've dedicated Tuesdays as our special evening, from the time I arrive home from work (5:15 p.m.) until the children go to bed. It has obviously meant adjusting our adult patterns, but could I honestly stand before God some day and claim I couldn't carve



three hours out of 168 per week for concentrated fathering? Is that too much for my children to expect? No. Especially when I get almost as much kick out of it as they do.

The ingredients of an evening are as follows. (This is a list of possible activities. With the exceptions of the meal and spiritual sharing/teaching, they needn't all be done every week.)

- *Food.* The evening begins with a good meal—"good" by a kid's definition. Hamburgers instead of liver. Pizza instead of casserole. No asparagus allowed. The location is varied, from outdoor picnics to dining room china and candlelight. (Who said finery is for outsiders only? Aren't kids special, too?) One night we even ate in a bedroom, just to be crazy.

Mealtime conversation is totally kid-centered. No office politics. Questions like "What was everyone doing at 10:30 this morning?" are answered round-robin.

- *Games.* Everything from touch football to dominoes, depending on the weather and the kids' preference. Games are parables of life in many ways, and what better place to learn sportsmanship than at home with Mom and Dad?

- *Excursions.* Too many families think only of \$50 extravaganzas at an amusement park, which few can afford more than once a year. Meanwhile, they miss the fun of a trip to an ice cream shop, a band concert in the park, a toboggan slide, a swimming pool, the public library, a hike around a lake.

- *Spiritual sharing/teaching.* Sometime during the course of the evening we take ten minutes or so—often in a circle on the floor—for Christian input. Again, the possibilities are endless, from stories, skits and pantomimes to serious Bible study with older children.

The best times are when we capitalize on what's happening in our children's lives. A year ago we spent a night talking about why our world has people like the Tylenol killer in it, and why others were trying to mimic the treachery. Aren't people trustworthy? Psalm 14 explained how our world has been basically ruined, and we needn't be surprised. We then went on to read Psalm 15 and reviewed the way God wants us to live, even

in a twisted society. We closed with a time of prayer for the killer.

Parents who say, "I'm not a teacher; I couldn't come up with things to do week after week" haven't been to a Christian bookstore lately to look at the array of family-time resources. The ideas are numerous, simply waiting to be implemented.

- *Outreach.* We've made cookies and taken them to a sick neighbor, gone to sing in nursing homes, made cards for those in hospitals. Anything to model ministry up close so kids can get the feel of reaching out to those in need.

- *Praying.* A prayer log has kept us organized, helping us to list our requests and to rejoice when we can check them off. It is important to keep prayer natural, conversational, and tailored to the length children will appreciate rather than dread.

## **Our togetherness is more important than the evening news, the day's mail, even the telephone.**

- *Crafts and projects.* This has ranged from assembling photo montages to erecting a basketball hoop. Often the craft can be merged with the spiritual teaching and/or the outreach as a reinforcement.

- *Music.* Every member's instrumental ability can be put to use without embarrassment. Singing fits well not only at home but in the car en route to some other aspect of the evening.

- *Snacks.* Provided the meal wasn't a feast, a batch of popcorn or homemade ice cream finishes the evening with warmth and goodwill. The way to a kid's heart is still through his stomach.

In all of this, two cardinal rules have served us well:

1. Whatever we do, we will do together—the five of us. We are split up enough all week long. This is the one time we regroup. We will do only those things that *all* family members consider fun.

Nathan's favorite game is

Monopoly. But it's too complicated for the twins at this point. This activity is thus out of bounds on Home Together Night.

2. We will not tolerate distractions. Our togetherness is more important than the evening news, the day's mail, even the telephone. Hence, the TV is off (unless there's a program all of us would enjoy), and the phone goes unanswered. Our friends know by now to call us later in the evening.

Even kitchen clean-up waits. These hours belong to the Lord and one another, exclusively.

I cannot promise any family that if they start, things will always run smoothly. There have been times Grace and I have had to stop the festivities and discipline a child very sternly, then continue. Most often when Home Together Night has faltered, however, it's been because she and I failed to think it through in advance, and chaos moved into the vacuum.

A family evening can't be done out of the hip pocket. A man and wife must believe in it strongly enough to sit down together 24 hours ahead and say, "What shall we do this week? What would they enjoy? What does the Lord want us to emphasize at this point?" This crucial planning goes faster, of course, if the couple keeps an idea folder, collecting possible activities from whatever sources they happen to come across.

And the final observation is this: It simply won't work without a commitment from Dad. Our kids are firmly in the habit by now, eager for Tuesday night to come, and my wife is a believer as well. The fellow who has to fight off the business obligations and other conflicts is me. If I don't take Home Together Night seriously, no one else will. I hold the power to make or break it.

And when I'm tempted to say I'm awfully busy and maybe we'd better skip this week, the words of Wayne Rickerson (*Getting Your Family Together*, Regal) bring me up short:

"Each family has its own set of 'impossible circumstances' that hinder it from having enough family time. However, an irrefutable fact of life is that we do the things we feel are most important. If the family is at the top of our list of priorities, we will be able to find family time." □