



Frenzied Families

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

My husband and I once had a “white picket fence” dream of family life. My brothers and I grew up playing outside, with family dinners and family vacations. Now I have three boys under the age of 6. My husband works all the time, and I feel like a single mother who is at her wit’s end, losing it, to the point that my boys do not even listen. Even though I am home, I feel frenzied, and so do my friends whether they work or not. There’s e-mail and laundry, play dates and carpool. I cannot find enough time to get my errands done and go to the gym. We live off of pizza. By the time my husband gets home, I am so burnt out, I find myself barking at him.

Is there a way out from under our frenzied household?

Dear Parent:

You are describing a common “frenzied” mindset in the metropolitan area for working and nonworking parents alike. We are living in a fast paced milieu. We no longer have one telephone to answer but a Palm Pilot, Outlook Express and Voicemail on at least two phones. Sending our children outdoors to play is passé. Being a good parent today means being on top of every nuance of your child’s psychological, emotional and developmental well-being. Parents want



to “have it all” and fall easily into an endless bind of inflated expectations for success and happiness. Many end up exhausted or on the brink of divorce.

When I venture out into schools and work environments to conduct “Parenting with Confidence” Coffeehouses, I frequently open my talk by asking parents how often they find time to meet with each other for just an hour simply to discuss what is working in the household and with each child, which means reflecting upon what is effective or not in order to adjust your system. The household “system” is about values and needs. It is the structure by which you live, such as your rules about screen time, homework, dinner-time and bedtime.

Most of the time not a single hand goes up and there is abashed laughter in the room. Apparently, many parents are on autopilot, and they are going to be at risk for a fair amount of “mood-based” and “knee-jerk” parenting. Decisions are apt to be made “on the fly,” and the incidence of inconsistency and misunderstanding is great. Children take full advantage of the frenzied system by engaging in “let’s make a deal” arguments that persist until the parent relents. This kind of parenting, born out of the frenzy, can result in demanding, out-of-order behavior. Furthermore, parents who resort to frequent reactive threats and bribes undermine their own authority. The bottom line is that a frenzied household often promotes misbehavior and exhaustion.

Here are some suggestions to help you begin to be mindful in order to transform your family dynamic as you balance everyone's needs:

- Parenting is a full-time job. Every family is unique. Do not look to your neighbor or to a self-help book for an ideal step-by-step guide to parenting. Gather information only to assess your needs and values as you devise your own system for parenting.

- Take an inventory of your priorities, your business and personal engagements in their entirety. Take a look at your budget, ideal and sufficient. Cut whatever you can that will result in a family life that balances all needs, including more time with dad home.

- Learn to compartmentalize. Create good boundaries. Work while you are at work, and then truly let go and be present with your family. Children tend to do more testing and misbehavior for negative attention when work and family demands merge. For example, when Dad is working at the dining room table after a long day at the office, what fun it is to fight for his attention.

- Be present with your children and engage them with complete presence prior to beginning other activities.

- We parent our children to prepare them to survive and thrive in the world in which we live. Our environment affects the pace and values. As you make decisions regarding neighborhoods, church or work, choose communities that suit your temperament and values.

- Adjust your expectations. Our frame of mind affects our mood. The bigger the gap be-

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tween your expectations and reality, the worse you feel. If the behavior you expect in your child is largely different from what is realistic, you set yourself up to feel discouraged. For example, expecting to get your own agenda done while barking out orders for your 3- and 5-year-olds to get ready in the morning is not realistic.

- The first step of parenting is to get clear about your needs and your goals. Both parents should try to carve out a meeting at least once a week to discuss your needs and your system, i.e. what is working or not so you can rework your situation, such as nap-time, etc.

- Find and create shortcuts. Take a shower every other day. Stop balancing the checkbook or go to the drycleaner once a month rather than weekly. Choose one sport per child. Find a violin teacher who comes to your house. Get a treadmill and stop going to the gym. Delegate or redefine work goals to match your parenting needs. Whatever it takes to make managing time easier.

- We raise children to be responsible by gradually shaping their independence. Many parents overindulge in the short run, which results in anger and exhaustion. Do not forsake parenting for laziness. Teach them to go to sleep by themselves, help out with chores, do their own homework and make their beds.

Self-reliance comes from practicing capability.

- Do not forget to nurture your marriage. Touch base frequently. Cultivate a loving and connected marriage. Schedule at least one date a week with your spouse, to play tennis, cook together or watch a movie.

- Know thyself and thy child. Family life involves dynamics and chemistry. Know what you can handle as a parent and pay attention to what is “pushing your buttons.” This parenting journey is about growth for you as well as your child.

Frazzled households are more about a state of mind than about clutter or disorganization. Bring down the “harried” feeling in the air by managing everyone's needs more realistically. This means knowing what you can handle given who you are, your goals and your circumstances. You cannot possibly be clear about any of this if you do not take the time to think and to be mindful. Keep your expectations realistic to avoid discouragement and agitation. More than likely, you want to raise children who can manage their needs just as you are modeling every day.

Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Her “Parenting with Confidence” Coffeehouse meets on the fourth Thursday of each month at Congregation Beth El. For more information, visit her website www.kayabrams.com.



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