

Secrets of a Made-to-Last Marriage

By Denise Schipani, Parenting

I think of the birth of my two sons as hurricanes -- gale-force winds and lashing rain that buffeted the "house" of my marriage. Three years into parenting, I can now say that our home was built strong enough to withstand our two little whirling dervishes, Hurricane Daniel and Hurricane James.

I have the best kind of husband -- faithful, funny, sensitive, a natural father, kind to a fault, and totally even-tempered. He makes me laugh, and he never makes me cry. I never worry about our relationship. Which is good, because I have a list as long as my arm of other things to worry about.



And yet shouldn't my marriage be better than good? While it's not bothersome right now that we routinely forgo sex in favor of sleep, or a babysitter and a movie in favor of saving money, might these wait-for-later routines trip us up down the line? Could all the times my husband graciously takes the boys to help me out, or I take them to help him out, also render us relative strangers in the one-on-one department? Are we spending enough time together? Are we really, really talking?

Surely, I'm not alone in wondering whether my hurricane-proof marriage might have a couple of shutters in danger of falling off, or a leak I've been steadfastly ignoring. But when I start to go down this path in my head, a couple of other thoughts leap in. First, my husband is just as child-focused as I am right now -- no one's complaining or sitting in petulant judgment. And, for heaven's sake, our boys are just helpless babies we are totally in love with. If we're neglecting our marriage a bit for their sakes, isn't that exactly what we're supposed to do?

"Of course," says Aline Zoldbrod, Ph.D., a psychologist and sex therapist in Lexington, Massachusetts. "Babies require an intense physical and emotional connection in order to survive and thrive. It's hardwired into us to give them that attention." But the trap many parents fall into, she and other experts say, is that they devote so much love to -- and get so much love from -- their children that they detach themselves from each other.

Denise Schipani and her husband just took their first mini-trip without their kids. Everyone did fine.

The back burner

At times, the problem lies in loving your partner from afar -- across the chasm of children and their needs, a home and its needs, and work, work, work. "Lately, my and my husband's job schedules have been insane, and Jim's been out of the house a lot. I joke that he'd better come home for dinner or the boys will forget what he looks like," says Lisa Latham, mom of Ian, 7, and Jamie, 4, in Pacific Palisades, California. "I understand it, yet there are moments when I start to feel hostile and alone. My mind starts telling me lies like 'It'll always be this way' or 'It would be easier to do this alone,' which I know, of course, it wouldn't be."

Marital love isn't any more logical than baby love. It can be as needy as a newborn, yet marriages don't "cry" for attention the way a baby does -- not until something's seriously amiss. Good-enough

marriages kind of... float. When you're in one, it's easy to believe that the love you shared with your partner prebaby is enough to coast on.

The reality: It is and it isn't. While many marriages can muddle through the rush and tumble of early parenthood without lasting damage, they can't be totally abandoned for long -- any more than your baby can.

The back-burner syndrome, says Susan Shapiro Barash, author of *The New Wife: The Evolving Role of the American Wife*, may be more common these days, with children's needs at the center of most families' focus. "We pay excruciating attention to every little change and aspect of development," she says. As a result, kids are catered to at the expense of marriages. Do you recall your parents "shushing" you and your siblings at the dinner table so they could talk? In many cases, yes. Can you imagine yourself doing the same thing? No, huh?

Reigniting the fire

Most nights in our house go like this:

- Baby bathed, nursed, and in the crib at 8 p.m.
- Toddler bathed, pj'd, and wrestled into bed by 9 p.m.
- Mom and Dad in bed by 10 p.m., to read for a scant few minutes before lights-out.

It sounds pathetic, but it's not. There are times, as I look at the man drifting to sleep beside me, that I think we have all the time in the world. We at least have tomorrow, and maybe tomorrow will be the day we make a conscious effort to inject an already loving marriage with romance.

Then again, I'm wary of putting that kind of pressure on things. "Putting the spark back in your marriage" leaves me cold. I don't want a "sparky" marriage, and I don't want to follow someone else's checklist -- chocolate-dipped strawberries? a drop of perfume on the lightbulb? -- to create it. Plus, who the heck really wants to recapture, in a marriage seasoned by kids, that fresh-from-the-altar feeling?

Rather than pining for hot honeymoon nights, I prefer to savor occasional, rejuvenating glimpses of the couple we used to be. So does Debra Witt of Center Valley, Pennsylvania, mom of Leo, 2, and Lucy, 8 months. "I make less-obvious gestures -- for example, I'll clear the magazines off the dinner table. Otherwise, we'd both sit there and read in silence while we eat," she says.

There's another, albeit ironic, way to feel like a couple: Arrange for each of you to have some alone time. When my husband can read a week's worth of neglected newspapers or I can chat with my sister on the phone, we find something essential in that space. We find that we need -- surprise! -- each other.

So there it is, the secret to staying married -- reasonably happily married, that is -- after kids turn your lives upside down. Let go every so often, and at other times, recognize that a little hand-holding can go a long way for now.

Couples in good-enough marriages know all about hurricane season, including that it does eventually blow out to sea. Says Lori Seto of New York City: "We didn't know what would happen after we had kids, but we knew we'd become these different people. We have the kind of track record that tells me we'll be okay in the end."

Last year, when our older son was not quite 2, my birthday went by without much fanfare. It took us three more months to call my sister to come babysit, and go out to dinner. This year, we cut the lag time down to just two months: We booked theater tickets, dropped the boys at my in-laws', and headed into the city for lunch and a matinee. Not bad. And for me -- for us -- good enough.