

## Getting Connected, Staying Connected

# How Children Serve to Deepen A Couple’s Marital Bond

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Parenting can be stressful but many couples find that being parents brings them joy, improves their communication skills, and strengthens their commitment to each other. This is No. 15 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

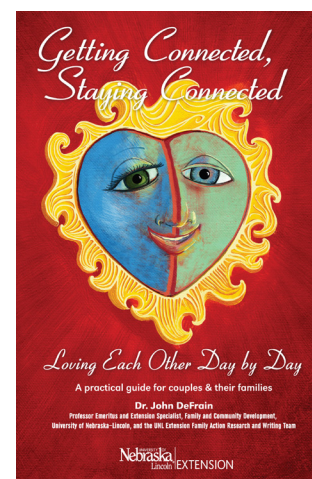
A team of university researchers — John DeFrain and Nikki DeFrain, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; LouAnn Woolman, Bellevue University in Omaha, Nebraska; and Linda Skogrand and Pam Morrill, Utah State University in Logan, Utah — are studying great marriages. The researchers learned that children can deepen the marital bond in many ways:

- Being parents does not have to diminish the quality of a couple’s marriage.
- Parenting can add greater meaning and depth to a marriage.
- Many couples who encountered challenges perceived these challenges as opportunities that drew them closer together as a couple.
- Having children can help contribute many positive emotions to marriage such as joy, happiness, and playfulness.
- Being a parent can help improve a couple’s interpersonal communication skills and helps develop similar conflict resolution styles. This increases positive communication within their marriage. They resolve disputes more effectively than they had prior to parenthood. Parenting gives couples more opportunities to communicate with each other. In addition, it can help couples strengthen the sense of respect, fondness,

and admiration they have for each other, as they experience the parenting process together.

- The birth of the first child can build maturity and unification into the couple’s relationship. It has often been observed that parents raise children, but in another important sense, children raise parents. The experience of parenting can bring out the best in a person and a couple. The responsibility of guiding a child can mold a young adult parent in very positive ways.
- A couple’s experience as parents can help to strengthen their commitment to each other.
- Parenthood can provide couples with a greater awareness and appreciation for the quality of their marriage.
- The process of parenting can help to develop a sense of *we-ness* between the partners. Their parental experiences can become a team effort with a shared purpose and goals for their children. Being part of this parenting team traveling together on a great adventure can serve to strengthen the marital relationship.

One mother we know told her daughters that, “I am a better person because of you.” Raising children gave the young woman an opportunity to mature and learn how to



**For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).**

focus on the needs of others rather than focusing so much on her own needs. Being a parent helped her develop patience, become a better problem solver, and become more creative in her thinking. And, because parenthood was helping the young woman to grow up herself, it helped her understand her husband and her relationship with him better. Fortunately, becoming a father had similar positive effects on her husband. For them, as for many couples, parenthood had positive effects on their marriage.

### Life Can Be Divided into Four Parts

The life of a couple with children can be divided into four parts:

1. *Life as a partner.* The time we spend with our mate.
2. *Life as a parent.* The time we spend caring for our children.
3. *Life as a person in the workplace.* The time we spend making money to support the family.
4. *Life as an individual.* The time we spend on ourselves. Time to think, to grow, to exercise, and maintain our physical health; time to develop our spiritual side, and to be involved in our community.

A very common pattern that can be observed in our busy American society is for parents to succeed in two important aspects of their life — *Life as a parent* and *Life as a person in the workplace* — and to fail in two other important aspects of their life — *Life as a partner* and *Life as an individual*. It is very easy to fall into this trap.

In a hard-driving society, parenting and work outside the home can easily be a more than full-time job. But, there are still two important aspects of our lives: our couple relationship and our personal health and well-being.

What commonly happens is that we care for our children and serve our boss, but because we are over-extended in life, we cut corners on our couple relationship and our personal health. We say to ourselves, “Well, I don’t have any time to spend with my spouse this week, but nothing can be done about it.” **What happens when we neglect our relationship with our partner over a long period of time is that our marital relationship erodes and the love we once felt turns to dust.**

Simultaneously, we say to ourselves, “Well, I don’t have any time for myself this week (to exercise, meditate, do fun things, pray, or whatever it may be that renews us as an individual). But that’s okay. I’ll get around to it when I can.” **When we neglect our individual needs and spiritual health over a long period of time, our physical health and mental health erode steadily and this is detrimental to our life as a partner, our life as a parent, and our life in the workplace.**

All four parts of our lives are inextricably linked together, and when one link is weakened, our whole life is threatened. In a very important sense, the couple relationship is the glue that holds our lives together. Our marriage in many ways is the foundation of our lives, and upon this foundation we build our lives as parents, as workers, and as healthy individuals. Too often we let our life in the rat race destroy the relationship we have with our partner. And, as everyone knows, the winner of every rat race is still a rat. If you decide that parenthood is stressful, if you decide that parenthood means only endless drudgery and conflict with your children, it will be so. Parenting can be stressful, but it is okay to be overwhelmed at times. Your partnership can help you overcome the difficult times.

On the other hand, if you decide that parenthood can be an exciting and fascinating adventure, you can be a parent who makes this happen. This is not to say that you (or anyone else, for that matter) control the world and can make everything in the world wonderful. But it *is* saying that you do control to a considerable extent your attitude toward the world and your attitude toward your children. Deciding to love your children and enjoy being with them is a major first step in making a grand adventure happen.

Focus on the good you see in the world, the beauty you see in your partner, the joy you experience watching your children grow. Nurture your relationship with your partner, because that relationship is the foundation for your family.

**For greater understanding** of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

### Resource

Woolman, L. (January 1, 2006). How children serve to deepen a couple’s marital bond: A qualitative study of great marriages. *ETD collection for University of Nebraska–Lincoln*. Paper AAI3237487. Website: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/dissertations/AAI3237487>

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**Index: Families  
Family Life**  
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