

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Quality vs. Quantity: Spending Time with your Children



BY: **KIM DEMARCHI**

Envision yourself at your computer working on an email. Then, your child appears, urgently asking you to come look at the butterfly he just caught in the jar in the backyard. He

is clearly excited, wanting you to drop what you are doing and attend to his wish of wanting you to see it as well. On one hand, you think to yourself, "I am busy. He can't just come interrupt me." On the other hand, you think, "What's the big deal? I'm going to see it!" But then again, you end your internal debate by saying to yourself, "I can't give in to him. He will be entitled and think he can get me to drop anything for him." So....you decide to tell your child that you can't come right now because you are very busy writing an email and you really need to finish it. In the next several minutes, which seems to last a lifetime, he stays by your side, whining and complaining about you not coming to see the butterfly. You try ignoring his requests, only to have him get louder and more demanding. You try explaining why you can't go see the butterfly, but to no avail. He is relentless. He begins to tug at your arm to come see it, triggering a chain reaction: He tugs at you. You yell at him. He throws himself down on the ground crying. And you STILL haven't written the email or seen the butterfly, even though you just spent the last 5-10 minutes engaged with him. Sound familiar?

As a parent of two children, I understand the above internal debate as well. I also know that children **need** to feel loved, valuable, listened to, and important. When children feel these things, they have higher self-esteem and the need to misbehave decreases. Frequently children come to their parents to connect and feel those things. It is almost as if they are little gas tanks that need to be replenished several times a day.

So, the question becomes how do we get our children to feel connected, loved, valuable, listened to, and important? The answer is **G.E.M.s: Genuine Encounter Moments**. A GEM can be described as focused attention. Such attention carries a special intensity born of direct, personal involvement with your child. Be intimately open to the particular, unique qualities of your child. Focused attention - direct involvement - "all hereness" are qualities that sends the message of "I care" to our children.

Many parents are with their children physically, but mentally their focus is elsewhere. I see so many moms and dads that are "spending time with their children", but in actuality, they are on their cell phones in the car on the family road trip, writing emails while waiting for their waiter to bring their dinner, or checking their social media while back to school shopping. Togetherness without genuine encounter is not togetherness at all. Parents are constantly advised to spend more time with their children. Yet, it is the quality of time and not the quantity that affects the feeling of being loved. But, remember, "busyness" cancels out "hereness". We parents are such busy people! We have so much on our plates and on our minds. It's not that we don't love our children; we do. But we have tasks to do, schedules to meet, carpools to drive, dinners to make, laundry to fold, work to attend to, and we rush to finish one task only to start on the next "must" on our list. Crazy schedules work against genuine encounters. I can tell when I'm too busy because I answer my children with an "Uh-huh", or a glazed look in my eyes pretending to listen but really thinking about the bill I have to pay or the groceries I need to buy. The problem is our children know it too!

Let's rewind to the scenario where you are composing an email and your child wants you to stop and come see their butterfly. You have 3 choices: 1.) ignore your child, 2.) pretend to listen, or 3.) listen attentively. We know what happens when we choose choice 1 or 2. Let's go with choice 3. When you listen attentively, you are having a Genuine Encounter Moment. Your child gets 100% of your focused attention. You are not thinking about what to make for dinner or the disagreement you had with your spouse.

The 5 Steps for Genuine Encounter Moments:

1. Get on the child's eye level
2. Look them directly in the eye in a loving/friendly manner
3. Lovingly touch them
4. Give 100% focused attention. Focus fully on what your child is saying. Get into their world. Use a lot of "Wow, tell me more" type sayings.
5. Give a "heart" response instead of a "head" response.



Let me explain a "head" response:

Child: "Mommy, look at my butterfly!"

Mommy: "Butterfly begins with the letter 'B'. The letter 'B' makes the /b/ sound. Can you say /b, b, b/?"

Okay parents out there that think every moment has to be a teachable moment ~ you just sucked the fun right out of the moment!

Another "head" response:

Child: "Daddy, look at my butterfly!"

Daddy (in a very intellectual tone of voice): "Yes, that's a monarch butterfly and it is migrating from the North to the South." Again, another ruined moment!

Listen to the difference of "heart" responses:

"It's beautiful!"

"Tell me all about it."

"Wow..."

This is when less is more, so to speak. Stop what you are busily doing and see the butterfly through your child's eyes. Be in the present moment. Let go of everything except the direct encounter with your child. You will be surprised when your child is fulfilled and is ready to get back to his play, leaving you to finish your email. Usually a GEM takes 2 minutes or less....a lot less than the original scenario of saying no to the child.

It sounds lovely, but I know half of you are saying to yourself, "This will be never ending! My child will never leave me alone. Their tank will never be filled." It is humanly impossible to give your child a GEM every time your child approaches you. You may not even be able to give your child a GEM at that moment. That's fine too. Acknowledge your child's request and give a time frame of when you will be able to give them the attention. Then make sure you keep your word. If you told your child you would join him in the backyard in 5 minutes, don't try to stretch it to 30. Keep your word and build the trust.

Many of my clients ask, "How many GEMS should I be giving in a day?" My answer is if you aren't giving any, give 1 a day. If you are giving 3, try giving 4. You will see a difference in your child and in the relationship. Make sure, though, that you as the parent, are in a good place. If I'm drained and exhausted, that's probably not the best time for me to give a GEM. But, if I'm feeling fulfilled and can take the time and effort, I give the GEM. It's usually beneficial to all of us! You may tell your child many times in a day how much you love them, but it is how you live with them day after day that proves your point.

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