

Date Night: Stoking the hearth of the home

By Judy Arnall

In the movie, *Date Night*, the characters played by Steve Carell and Tina Fey, are in a long term relationship that they try to spice up by going out to dinner once a week on a date night. The trouble is that their date night is, monotonously predictable: they go to the same restaurant and order the same food on the same night. They start to notice the sameness when they become a little too clichéd even for their own taste by talking about the variation of the chicken quality instead of their feelings, week by week. One night, they do something different – they dress up, pick a new restaurant and go to dinner in the city for a change. What happens next is hilarious and they end up with an incredible evening tale – probably one that no couple would wish for – but the end result was that they had a renewed sense of each other as the people they loved – not just roles such as parents, children, siblings, etc, although those roles were strengthened as well.

No matter how long they have been together, couples need sparks, creativity and fun in their relationship. As the years pass, they need it even more. For centuries, organized religion has discovered that people need continuous affirmation of their faith in the form of weekly rituals such as church attendance. Relationships need the same kind of tendering and care. Regular meetings are required in order to talk, have fun, and spend time together. We know that friendships survive on shared interests, yet, as soon as we partner up with our very best friend, we tend to settle into domestic boredom and let the shared interests slide. Every relationship has peaks and valleys – moments where love is overwhelming and moments when you seriously wonder why you are still with him or her. Couples need to remind themselves the qualities that they saw in each other at the beginning of the relationship, and what they still love about each other. This is even more critical when mortgages, pets, children, jobs, laundry, broken appliances, normal conflicts and elderly caretaking occur alongside the couple relationship. These are normal stresses, but they can be overwhelming in a relationship without some nurturing buffers such as date night and time together.

Research shows that the first five years of a relationship are the most difficult because of career building demands, money woes, and especially the parenting of babies and toddlers. The lack of sleep, child tantrums, worry, and differing parenting styles, can tear down the closeness and caring of even the most loving of couples as we tend to take our parenting frustrations out on each other, rather than the children. This can be toxic to relationships. We need frequent reminders to be kind and caring to each other, in the good times and especially in the challenging times. As kids get older and easier to parent, relationships naturally improve, but take a dip again in the teen years. This coincides with menopause, career peaking, travel, and mid-life crisis issues. We may start to look around the buffet table, even though we are on a diet! The parenting of teens can be challenging and adds to the stress. Couples need to put more work into their relationship at this stage, similar to the first five years. Research shows that after the teen stage, relationships improve and enrich. There's a no-brainer, because parenting is so much "done".

We started our own date night when we have three children under three and felt we were losing the essence of “us” in the dreary day to day details of domestic life. We made a point of hiring a standing sitter to come every Tuesday evening. Some days we were so tired, we blearily welcomed in our sitter, grabbed our pillows and headed to the parked car in the driveway for a blissful, uninterrupted nap. People would question the cost of a standing sitter but we considered it a financial investment. Research shows that divorce is the single most disastrous event that devastates couples’ finances and wealth, and in light of that, we felt that hiring a weekly sitter made sound financial sense. Not only did we fund her college education, the kids actually enjoyed the sitter coming, since we didn’t have any grandparents or relatives to take over. She was fun, responsible and became an extended family member. The kids loved the new video games she brought each week.

It was hard when the young babies and toddlers were going through separation anxiety. Although we are both attachment parents, their crying seemed to bother me more than my partner. I would like to say the decision was easy, but like many grey areas in life, sometimes I felt that I couldn’t leave the kids and so I discussed with my husband some ways to stay at home and not leave them, and he was sensitive to my needs. Other times, I realized his needs had to come first and we absolutely needed some time alone for the sake of our relationship or we might not make it through another week. We would desperately say goodbye to the kids as gently as we could and walk out the door. Like any relationship, we had to see whose needs were paramount at that moment, and meet them. That’s real life and the eighth principle of attachment parenting. The kids usually had settled in with the sitter, when we phoned ten minutes later, and most often, we had a great evening, a heartfelt talk and the kids were okay. We felt that a strong parenting partnership was the greater good for all concerned in the long run. As is many parenting decisions, when and how to leave the children is a decision that each couple must make and decide when is best for them.

We felt a critical aspect of parenting is giving the kids a role model for respectful relationships and a blueprint for keeping love, passion and companionship alive in long term, monogamous relationships, whether that followed a traditional husband –wife marriage or domestic partnership between consenting, loving adults, whatever gender. We try to hash out conflicts in front of the kids as well as resolve and make up too. We also need to show them that parents are humans too.

In addition to date night, we also have private time on our own. We have Mom’s night out (mommy goes to the movies or book club with her friends) and Dad’s day out (dad goes out to play volleyball with his friends). People need to care for themselves in order to care for others.

We also have kid date night (although I can’t call it that anymore with the teens around) where one of us or both will take each kid out one-on-one for some special time. They get to pick what we will do. We mark off their birth date on the calendar each month and then everyone knows that is the date to keep clear. For example, my son was born on September 4th so every 4th of the month is his day. In the early days, with my partner working out of town, I would get a sitter to stay with the other kids. It’s amazing the difference in our parent-child communication because of that and how much it cuts down on sibling fighting.

Twenty four years later, we are still going strong. With five children, some of who are teens and adults, we no longer need sitters. Spontaneity is back. We can suggest a movie to each other, and be out the door in five minutes, just like we did BC (before children). We even put some friendly daring into the mix – once we parked in the expectant parent’s parking spot at the movie theatre and then ordered the seniors rate movie tickets to get in! Don’t tell the kids!

The “Date Night” Rules

Together, choose an evening of the week for date night, but make it consistently the same day of the week or it gets left by the wayside. If you have children, hire a standing sitter to come each week at the same time. Try to get a sitter who drives and pay the sitter well. If finances are a problem, join a babysitting co-op and trade tokens. If separation anxiety is a problem, plan date nights at home when the children are asleep. Each partner takes a turn planning the date, executing, driving, and paying. The other partner is the guest. Then, the next week, switch roles. It’s more fun to keep plans a secret until you are both in the car or it’s the time of the date. Surprise is part of the fun! The planner should hire the sitter and feed the kids before you go out. Look your best, even for home dates. The only information the guest needs to know is what to wear and if they should eat before going out. Try to plan an evening without friends, so that intimate subjects can be addressed if need be. Some subjects are difficult to bring up, but with time and space, it’s better to broach the subjects and give it air time, than to bury it. Couples who bury critical conversations end up with nothing to talk about in the later years and drift apart. Be tolerant and enjoy the evening as much as possible knowing that your partner put a lot of effort into making it special for you, even if they didn’t quite nail it that week.

For more ideas that are continually updated, visit our blog, Date Night YYC. Even though the ideas are for Calgary and area, they are easily transferable to any city. If you have young children, check out the blog for information on how to start a Baby Sitting Co-op.

Date Night-Out Ideas

- Live Theatres (High schools and smaller troupes have cheap or no cost nights)
- Concerts (Check out university and community bands)
- Parks and reserves offer boating rentals
- Go out for a coffee or a beer at the local pub
- Movie in the park
- Picnics everywhere
- Dinner crawl – go to several restaurants for appetizer, salad, main and dessert.
- Pub hopping downtown
- Zoo, Museum, Library or Science Centre
- Wine tasting events
- Couple massage
- Pottery painting
- Classes
- Friends’ house party

- Go out for breakfast or meet for lunch
- “Lovers or couples” trade show
- Comedy theatre, Pecha Kucha, MoMondays
- Bike ride, either cycle or motorcycle
- Drive-in or movie-in-the-park
- Pick up take-out and watch the planes land at the airport
- Go-carting or laser tag
- Shakespeare or other plays “in the park”
- Fitness: gym date, bowling, rock climbing, yoga, roller skating, golf, hiking, or simply running
- Lecture (Check out libraries, universities and bookstores)
- Volunteer together such as canvassing, working at the food bank and places where you can talk and have fun
- Window shop
- Ride the City trains – bring a snack and have a train picnic

Date Night-In Ideas

- Snuggle in bed with a movie and a picnic of wine, bread and cheese
- Dinner and movie at home with a theme such as French night – have crepes and watch “La Chocolat”
- Board or card game night
- Dance
- Bake cookies
- Play video games
- Read together in the bathtub, with candles, salts and wine
- Grab a pillow and blanket and sleep in the car with the baby monitor on
- Pick up books from the library and have a read-in around the fireplace
- Sit around the fire-pit outside and make marshmallows or hot dogs
- Relax in the hot tub
- Be a kid again and use the trampoline (or just lie on it and watch the stars), swing set, or swimming pool.
- Turn off all the lights and sit in the dark and watch the animal world outside.
- Bring out photo albums or watch photos and videos on the big screen at home

Date Night-No Sitter-Available Ideas

- Car rides and walks (kids will either fall asleep or be entertained by the DVD player you bring).
- Go to places like Ikea, McDonalds, Airports and children’s hospitals. Grab a coffee and a bench and utilize the play places to keep your kids entertained where you can talk but keep an eye on the children.
- Go to Chapters or other book stores and plunk the kids in the Kids section with an assortment of books. Grab the in-house coffee and find a nearby seat.
- Set the alarm early and have coffee on the porch and watch the sun come up together.
- Take the kids to the playground and have a picnic for you two.

- If your kids are school-aged, book two tables at a restaurant at least 10 yards apart. Sit your kids at one table, and you and your partner at another. Monitor them from afar. Pretend you are the Aunt and Uncle so you don't worry about their behavior. Works even better with teens.

Happy dating!

Judy Arnall is a conference speaker, family communications trainer, and bestselling author of “**Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery.**” She is co-founder of Attachment Parenting Canada www.attachmentparenting.ca and www.professionalparenting.ca Her date night blog is at <http://datenightyyc.wordpress.com/about/>