

Family ties in a digital age

Adapting to Changing Family Dynamics



How family members related to each other – its dynamics – used to be quite simple. They spent time together around the dinner table, in front of the television or playing in the backyard. But thanks to the digital revolution, family dynamics have been transformed and that can cause challenges and even conflicts.

Technology has brought many families closer. Grandparents at the other end of Canada can, through Skype, see their grandchildren grow and remain a familiar presence in their lives. Relatives around the world can share photographs, videos and information through Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr. Busy parents and kids keep track of each other throughout the day via text messages.

Technology can also divide families. Evenings spent together around the television or dinner table have given way to the online gaming, shopping, news, music, movies and chat, with each family member involved in a different activity on a different device in a different room. Many working parents find themselves spending their evenings

responding to business emails and calling clients rather than spending time with their children who are instead talking to friends via Facebook, online games, text, IM or Internet chat rooms. And while smartphones allow parents to know where their children are – and with whom – they often have no idea what their children are doing online.

Keeping family ties strong

If you and your partner are finding it difficult to create and maintain strong family bonds in this digital age, try the following:

- **Don't overschedule.** If your children are involved in a lot of activities and you and your partner have a lot of

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obligations, book “do nothing” time on your calendar so the family can just relax together.

- **Eat together.** If it’s too difficult coordinating four or five schedules, try a regular family dinner every Sunday or brunch every Saturday.
- **Play together.**
 - **Go for a walk or hike.** Start by taking a short walk together every evening. If you have a dog, walk it every day as a family.
 - **Play a sport** – tennis, golf, or bowling are all activities every family member can enjoy. Getting involved with sport also helps increase everyone’s fitness levels.
 - **Have a family game night.** Turn off the computers, TVs, smartphones and video games and dust off those old board games. Introduce your children to the games you enjoyed playing when young.
 - **Take up a family hobby** such as scrap-booking, bird watching or gardening.
 - **Visit the museum or planetarium.**
 - **Bake.** Even young children enjoy helping bake a cake or cookies – and it’s also a great way for them to learn and practice reading, measuring, and cooperating.

“ Focus on each other. During family time turn off all smartphones and other devices – especially in a restaurant, at the movies, or family gatherings.”

- **Take a trip.** If you don’t have the time or resources to go camping for example, pitch a tent in the back yard. Or pack a picnic and go to the park or out into the countryside.
- **Volunteer.** Find something everyone is passionate about and then volunteer as a family. For example, if your children love animals, volunteer at the local animal shelter. Or teach your children the importance of involved citizenship and donate your time to a local food bank.
- **Invest in each relationship.** Every relationship needs nurturing. Have a weekly or bi-weekly date night with your partner; spend one-on-one time with each of your children. Have your partner do the same.
- **If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.** If your child is an avid video game player, ask him to teach you how to play his favourite game so you can play together. If this is an online game, you can also get to know the online community and any potential dangers.
- **Tackle projects.** Clean out the basement, have a garage sale, paint the spare room or create a flower garden. Working together can also provide great learning opportunities for the younger members of the family.
- **Develop new family traditions and rituals.** Family traditions create a sense of cohesiveness. They can help define your family. Traditions can centre on holidays, ethnicity, cultural or religious practices and life events. Or make up your own. You can have bedtime rituals, weekend traditions, etc.

