

Look me in the eye and try a little tenderness

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS talking to a friend about her children the other day in the lead-up to Christmas and it reminded me of many stories I've been hearing of late. "I feel guilty all the time," she said, sighing, and playing with the sugar-shaker on the cafe table. "My whole life revolves around the kids, and yet I feel as if I'm not being a good parent.

"I can't explain," she said, growing frustrated. "I am a full-time taxi-driver. I spend every day picking one up from here, and taking one to there.

"At the moment it's absolute chaos because all of them are in school plays and performances to do with after-school classes. I have to get costumes for three different things for each of them and run them to rehearsals, and then run and see one child perform, than rush and see the other.

"Then there are swimming lessons so they are pool-safe, then the summer clothes I have to buy because they've grown out of last year's clothes ..." "But what's the problem?" I asked, trying to find out the cause of all the angst.

"It sounds like you are doing an amazing job. Sounds like you are being a perfect, wonderful mother." Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm not. I feel cranky with them because I'm run off my feet doing all the practical things that need doing. And I can't seem to find time to just ... love them." I suddenly got a flash of what she was talking about. It's a real phenomenon that tends to surface this time of year: the guilt that comes with over-parenting but undernourishing children. A sort of vague sensation we get as parents when we're not really acting from love, but rather obligation and duty, necessity not creativity.

We go into "quantity" not "quality" parenting because we're tired and worn out. And I think the condition pervades our long-term relationships, too, where we suddenly feel stretched and that we're giving from duty, not inspired love. We feel guilty that we're not being good enough partners.

When this sort of quantity-giving takes place between adults it's a negotiable point, which often gets resolved in the bedroom. But children have no way of understanding or expressing their hurt at being driven about, picked up, bought things, yet somehow being neglected at a profound level of personal validation.

Recently I had cause to ponder much the same issue and I remembered something a Freudian-trained psychologist friend of mine, Desiree Saddik, told me years ago. At the time she was working as an adviser to the government in the field of child welfare.

What she explained was that children need to be gazed at with adoration and love. When a mother gazes at a child during breastfeeding, or in the crib, the mother is flooded with hormones that bond her to the child. The gaze acts as a trigger to oxytocin, the "cuddle chemical", and other natural euphorics, that make the mother fall passionately "in love" with the newborn.

The child, on seeing the gaze, is filled with a deep sense of security, warmth and safety -- smelling the hormones produced, reacting to the stimulus and probably producing its own feel-good chemicals in response that aid in development.

As part of the solution to my quantity parenting, I decided recently to set aside time each day, even amid the maelstrom of buying, driving and feeding, and gaze at my daughter with what Saddik had termed "the type of gaze you would normally reserve for a lover." What I do is make a point of holding my child in my arms, either in bed at night, or on the couch after switching off the TV, or in the bath, and stroking her hair and gazing lovingly at her.

I adore her with my eyes. It doesn't take a huge amount of time but the results have been startling for her and for me, as we tap back into that intimate, precious time she and I both remember at a cellular level.

And because I'm so present for my child and my heart is so open to her, I find that the sweetest words come out of my mouth. Not the "I love you" tagged on to the "cheerio" we mutter to our children at the end of a hectic day, rather the "I love you" whispered soft and low, from a profound place.

Due to the tender things I say, I've taken to calling this Tender Time. And it only needs a few moments each day. Fathers are crucial to the process, too. The male gaze is no less potent than the female's. So rather than just reading a bedtime story and giving the children a peck on the cheek this holiday period, it's worth trying a tender look while stroking the cheek, a lying next to and holding close, a whispering of loving words or sweet songs.

For my family, at least, Tender Time has proved to be the simple, missing ingredient in the complex stew of better parenting.

www.ruthostrow.com

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