

Back Together Again

THE WORD “REUNION” usually calls to mind images of high school classmates catching up or family members gathering from near and far. The definition of “reunion” is “the act of reuniting.” To see its essence, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=nr7DcJdbCS0 and watch the surprise reunions of military parents on leave from Iraq greeting their children. Older children might enjoy watching it with you.

The emotions that underlie reuniting are relevant to every family, since we separate and come back together, even when we live together. Sometimes family members leave each other for business trips or vacations, but even on a non-travel day, we go apart and rejoin each other again. The real reason young children often resist sleep can be because they don't want to leave us. The same could be said about their reluctance to hurry to depart in the morning. The way to smooth these transitions isn't by ignoring them. Honoring little reunions can make a significant difference in family life.

In our recent workshop on handling stress in children, the father of a preschooler shared what a powerful change instituting a 10-minute reunion after picking up his daughter has made in their evenings. He says, “During these 10 minutes, I play or talk about whatever my daughter wants. I can see she is satiated with love and attention when we finish. It also helps me let go of the day. Spending this short time before starting dinner connects us. We just don't have the struggles.”

Establishing the importance of reuniting needs to come from the parent. Children are usually engaged in an activity when an adult comes to pick them up at the end of the day. Even though they've missed their parents, and often referred to them during the day, they don't usually drop what they are doing and run for a heartfelt embrace. When a parent watches his child's activity and says how much he missed her during the day, reconnecting goes better. In the morning, parents can also create a 10-minute connection with a child that will awaken good feelings the whole day.

When parents have to travel, children miss them and struggle to cope with their feelings. In our stress workshop, we talked about the importance of sharing information about traveling with teachers so they can offer a child extra support. A few years ago, I met with a mother who felt very sad about the business trips she had to take. In fact, she felt so bad that she didn't call home when she was away. She didn't want to awaken feelings of missing her in her daughters. We talked about how much her girls needed to express those emotions and connect with her emotionally so that their link with her didn't feel broken. She began talking to them on the phone, and the whole family felt the strength of their bond even when she was away.

Celebrating the reuniting process with a cup of hot chocolate before homework or 10 minutes of play is like putting a plug in the socket. Paying complete, loving attention to our children, looking in their eyes and expressing our delight at seeing them creates a loving atmosphere that lasts.

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