

Secrets of Stress-Free Family Time

Here's how to downshift from a busy day so you can relax and reconnect with the ones you love.



The first 10 minutes after you arrive home set the tone for the whole night. It's been a long, hectic, exhausting day, and all you want to do is wash your stress away with a hot, foamy bath or some mindless TV. But you can't, of course. You've got to start the evening shift at home. And when you're feeling frazzled and tired, switching gears to reconnect with your family isn't so easy. "After a tough day, you're worn thin and on the verge of losing it with your kids," notes Ingrid Schweiger, Ph.D., a family therapist in New York City. But blowing your top could mean blowing family time altogether, she says, because research shows that the first 10 minutes after you walk through the door at night determine the tone and outcome of the rest of your evening.

You can make it through the witching hour without becoming a witch, however, if you take the time to re-enter family life the right way. First, show your husband and kids that you're there for them — say hello, make eye contact, hug them, kiss them. Then, grab a moment just for you, Schweiger suggests: "Change your clothes, sit down somewhere — whether it's the bathroom or your walk-in closet — and for two minutes visualize a peaceful evening with your family." You'll be calmer, cooler, and genuinely ready to really be with your husband and kids.

What to do next? Here, 10 women share their creative ideas for easing back into family life after a difficult day:

Break the Rules

"Every now and then, we have 'backward night.' We skip homework (putting it off until the next morning), put on our pj's, and play board games until my husband comes home from work. For dinner, we have pancakes, scrambled eggs, sausage, and orange juice. Afterward we grab blankets, snuggle on the sofa, and watch DVDs. It gives us all a chance to let go of the rules for a short period of time and relax together. It also creates really great family memories." —Michele Dortch, 36, Glendale, AZ; mom to Chanelle, 8, Peyton, 6, and Legend, 3

Lay Low

"When I'm supertired, I stretch out on the living room floor and let my kids climb all over me. My two younger children especially love this. Being down on the ground with them keeps me from even being able to look at the things that need to get done, like the stack of mail on the table that needs sorting. I'm more present, and my kids sense that. My focus is on them and the closeness we're sharing. Plus, I get to lie down for a little while!" —Bernadette Noll, 44, Austin, TX; mom to Lucy, 11, Otto, 9, Esme, 6, and Dean, 2

Do a Pet Project

"Our golden retriever, Ajax, waits patiently for us all day. After I take him to the curb to do his business, I sit in the living room with my kids and play monkey in the middle, tossing a ball around the room over his head. Sometimes he intercepts a fly ball, sometimes he'll chase it to the intended recipient, sometimes he'll fetch. It's always a source of much hilarity. No matter what kind of mood I'm in when I get home, playing with Ajax and my kids puts us all in an affectionate mood. His unconditional love is contagious."

—Molly Gordy, 54, New York City; mom to Chloe, 19, and Sophie, 11