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Saying No: The Best New Year's Resolution for Parents

By Bethany Hardy

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Uh oh, it's resolution-making time again. Does the thought of adding another commitment to your plate make you want to hide under your bed until spring?

Relax! Saying "no" to the many demands placed on your time and energy can actually enrich your relationship with your kids.

Here are five "no"-focused resolutions to help you ease into the new year:

1) Stop overcommitting.

Jumping into too much, too soon, is a pitfall of many parents, especially those who stay-at-home. When I stopped working to care for my young son, I worried about losing contact with the "grown-up" world. Consequently, I signed up for every committee or class I could find. Eventually, instead of feeling connected, I felt overwhelmed.

Negotiations coach Jim Camp, author of "Start with No: The Negotiation Tools That the Pros Don't Want You to Know," agrees that determining what extracurriculars are worth a parent's limited time can be difficult. He recommends that parents sit down and identify a family "mission" to help them prioritize. "It really empowers you to focus on those things of most importance and to allow those things of lesser importance to go by the wayside," he says.

2) Don't be a doormat at work.

If you are a working parent, it's important to handle requests from your boss in a way that won't skew your work-life balance.

Say your supervisor asks you to stay late to finalize a last-minute project, but your daughter's soccer game is starting in 30 minutes. "Honor your commitments, but also try to help your boss solve the problem they are looking to solve," advises Camp.

In addition, avoid sharing unnecessary personal details when working it out, says work-life integration coach Carolyn Semedo, founder of The Enterprising Moms. She notes that this is one area where men's and women's approaches differ: "The fact that it's a soccer game shouldn't be relevant ... steer away from the 'what' and don't bring that into the picture." The key is to avoid surprises by setting expectations with your boss at the outset and agreeing on a reasonable time frame for completing assignments, Semedo says.

3) Avoid information overload.

In today's wired world, it's impossible to avoid feeling overwhelmed by information—whether it's e-mail, voicemail or texts.

"The ease with which we can communicate with each other makes us impatient and treat every inquiry as if it's urgent, requiring immediate attention," says Tracey Marks, an Atlanta-based psychiatrist and psychotherapist. It's important, she says, is to set expectations: "You can train people to expect you to respond immediately by doing just that. Likewise, you can train them to wait on your responses by making them wait ... [until] it is convenient for you to check your mail."

Indeed, the quality of your family life will improve when you "embrace time as a friend, not foe," adds Christine Louise Hohlbaum, author of "The Power of Slow: 101 Ways to Save Time in Our 24/7 World." "When we disengage from clock combat, suddenly those e-mails that come in 'after hours' don't seem all that important," she says.

4) Don't lose your cool with your kids.

When your kids are trying your patience, avoid stress and resentment by refusing to take the bait. Calming yourself before you react is key, says Charlotte Reznick, child psychologist and author of "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success."

When reining in a whining tot, she advises, "Short, simple answers are best. Preschoolers' thinking skills aren't really that well developed. They're more 'in the moment' and they can't think through a problem to conclusion."

5) Say good-bye to parental guilt.

For parents struggling to maintain balance, the "guilt monster" can rear its ugly head all too often.

Amber Fitzgerald, a full-time teacher and mother of two, recalls how she first realized that taking time out for herself could benefit her kids. A friend "reminded me that what I did, what I prioritized, would be seen by my children and someday emulated by them," she says. "I soon realized that if I wanted my children to make their future marriages, careers and relationships with their children a success, I had to start with me — their best living, breathing example."

So instead of fretting over whether that new gym membership will go to waste, focus your resolutions on saying no. Simplifying your life will help you start the new year healthier, happier and more connected with your children.

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