

CLOSE TO HOME

Childless couples face challenges

"You and Tim must have these great intellectual conversations," a family friend said. "I'll bet the two of you discuss fascinating topics."

I laughed and said, "Sorry to disappoint you, but it's more like, 'Can you pick Sara up from soccer today?' 'John needs a bath.' 'Will you help me bring in the groceries?'"

I told him that my husband and I are so caught up in day-to-day life with four children that we rarely have time for mind-expanding discussions.

"You guys sound just like us," my friend said in surprise. "We get so busy with the kids and everyday stuff that we don't have a lot of time to really talk."

Our friends Steve and Amy Lambert of Upland told me about their frequent, expansive talks about a variety of topics. Like Tim and I, the couple has been married for 20 years.

"That sounds idyllic," I told Amy. "I would love to have time for those kinds of leisurely conversations with Tim without some kind of interruption from the kids."

Because Steve, a clinical family therapist and professor, and Amy, a social worker, have no children together, they have the uninterrupted time for spontaneous and prolonged discourse. It's an art that many parents have lost and need to rediscover, Steve said. He said that it's easy for parents to get so caught up in the lives of their children they have nothing else to talk about.

A man and woman can stay married for several years and rarely talk because they are living their lives vicariously through their children, Steve said. Each parent may know the children well, but not his or her partner. When the last child leaves home, often couples find they have nothing in common and little to talk about.

The empty nest syndrome can lead to divorce, lackluster co-existence, or a revitalized marriage. Communication problems at this time of life can be avoided if couples make a



VERONICA JAMES

conscious effort to maintain their relationship independent of their children, Steve said. Steve recommends all couples plan a weekly date night to spur conversation in an intimate setting without interruption. He also suggests that couples plan weekly recreational activities, if possible.

"We make it our commitment to go out to a nice dinner on Friday night, our date night, and a dinner after church on Sunday afternoon," he said.

The couple also enjoys weekly hikes, eating out with other couples and visiting friends. They take five or six weekend trips together per year, each lasting about four days. They like to visit the high desert and enjoy boat rides down the Colorado River.

Parents can enjoy similar activities if they set aside time to be together.

Steve and Amy also said humor helps maintain a healthy long-term relationship.

"I feel like Steve and I both have a good sense of humor and that's a major part of who we are together," Amy said. "He can really make me laugh hard. Humor is a very important part of our lives. I don't think a day goes by where we don't enjoy laughing together."

As I talked with the couple, I began to wonder if children played a part in marital satisfaction and longevity. There are relationship advantages to being childless, Steve said, but statistics show that having children tends to give a couple stability.

"The least stable relationship is one between just two people," he said. "It's good in that it forces two people to get to know one another at a deeper level. But it can produce instability in that a huge amount of

emotional energy is focused on just one person rather than spread out on a number of people as in a larger family.

"A quality relationship with another adult person can be a very joyful thing, but it can also be a difficult thing because the deeper you get to know somebody the more aware you become of their issues and the more aware they become of your issues," Steve said. "So, there's an intensity in that type of relationship. With kids, some of the intensity is diffused in other directions, which can be good and bad."

Steve and Amy said they sometimes become overly serious or self-analytical as a result of their interaction.

"Because I don't have kids, interactions with Steve can be more intense and I tend to think more about areas of weakness I have that I need to be working on," Amy said. "If we had kids it would be less serious. There would be more lighthearted play and laughing and singing and watching cartoons on TV, and I wouldn't be thinking on such heavy matters as frequently as I do."

Steve and Amy want to encourage couples to make the best of their strong points and to work on their areas of weakness. Steve said that childless couples can have a deeper level of uninterrupted communication and can spend more quality time together in many cases. They also tend to have fewer time constraints.

Through their work and relationships with families, Steve and Amy share a respect and love of families with children.

"I want couples with kids to be affirmed and empowered," Steve said. "We have great respect for families and there are a lot of advantages to having kids."

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