

## Getting to Know Your Kids, One on One

By: KJ Dell'Atonia

Parents can take advantage of hidden opportunities to create one-on-one time with each of their children, says Dr. Harley Rotbart, a pediatrician and author whose books include “No Regrets Parenting.”

Any time you're alone with your child, even if it's just a car ride to soccer practice or cleaning out the garage, it's a chance to talk, he said.

“There are things in your kids' heads that you didn't put there. You only know that if you know them well enough that they can share that with you.”

I reached out to Dr. Rotbart for help responding to this question, which a reader sent via email. (As always, readers are invited to offer advice in the comments.)

*I'm struggling with the simultaneous needs of 3 kids and wondering if your readers have advice about doing one-on-one time with each kid. Do parents of multiple kids carve out time so they can have 1-on-1 time with each of them? Is it helpful? Especially parents of twins (or higher order), where it's easy to treat the kids as a “unit.”*

Dr. Rotbart said this is one of the most common questions he hears as a pediatrician and speaker. One-on-one time, he said, is important — but probably not for the reason you think, especially over the long term.

“If your kids are always with their siblings but you're getting them safely to soccer practice, sitting down to dinner with them, creating that family experience, your kids are going to be fine,” he said. “But that individual relationship is something you don't want to miss.”

This is not, he said, about day-to-day efficiency. “It's about gaining a deeper understanding of who your child is, and giving them a deeper understanding of who you are.”

But how to be alone with one child when you have two or more is a challenge for many parents, and particularly single parents. I have four kids (14, 11, 10 and 10), and even in a two-parent household with ample baby-sitting help, we have never succeeded at making one-on-one time part of the routine. Although periodically, usually driven by some incident or article I've read, we've tried to schedule it.

Instead, our one-on-one time tends to arise naturally, especially as our children get older. Long drives to sporting events, travel for school competitions or nights when a movie or other activity takes some of our kids out of the house often turn into one-on-one time. So do interests that one of our kids might share with us, or projects we work on together. Once we realized that, we became more deliberative about the process, so while we weren't officially scheduling the one-on-one time, we were watching to make sure every child had it.



According to Dr. Rotbart, taking advantage of the opportunities that are already there is the key to forging and strengthening these relationships, and for some families may even work better than scheduled “dates.” Parents can expand these times — walking to piano lessons rather than driving, for example, or adding a lunch stop to a long drive — and can also look for other opportune times to hang out with just one child.

“I tell parents they should never do a chore alone,” Dr. Rotbart said. It may not speed up the task, but involving a child in doing the laundry or a basement clean-up is another chance to spend time together.

He also suggests a shift in the bedtime routine. If you normally put all the children to bed at the same time, perhaps with the same books and songs, take one night a week to give each child an extra story and time for a chat, maybe starting early if children share a room. Taking time to build that individual relationship when children are young will also make that one-on-one time feel more natural as your children grow into teenagers.

In the short term, the time you spend getting to know your child can pay off in a better understanding of how to be that child’s parent, helping you to manage everything from emotional outbursts to homework struggles. But Dr. Rotbart, a new grandfather and the parent of three adult children, takes what he calls the “selfish” long view.

“We have a house with four bedrooms, and all but ours are empty now,” he said. “When you walk down that hallway full of family pictures and past those empty rooms, you want to think, ‘I did the best job I could; I know my kids, and I have a relationship with each of them that I cherish.’” Don’t think of one-on-one time as just something your children need, he says. You need it, too.

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[http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/getting-to-know-your-kids-one-on-one/?em\\_pos=small&emc=edit\\_ml\\_20160324&nl=well-family&nl\\_art=6&nlid=74699726&ref=headline&te=1](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/getting-to-know-your-kids-one-on-one/?em_pos=small&emc=edit_ml_20160324&nl=well-family&nl_art=6&nlid=74699726&ref=headline&te=1)

March 18, 2016

