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I Wish I'd Known . . .

That Having Children **RADICALLY CHANGES** *Your* **SCHEDULE**

I remember the Sunday morning our daughter was born. I woke up to hear Karolyn saying, “I’m having contractions.” “What does that mean?” I asked. “I think the baby is coming.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I think we need to go to the hospital.”

So I quickly dressed and we were off to the hospital. I had never experienced having a baby, nor had she. We were both excited, but more than a little naive.

We had been married three years and we were ready to have a child, or so we thought. We had always planned to have children. When we were dating, Karolyn said that she wanted to have five boys. (She was from a large family.) I was “in love” so I said,

“Whatever you want is fine with me.”

I had no idea what I was saying.

However, on that morning I was ready for our first one. We did not know whether it would be a girl or a boy. I know this is hard to believe, but this was before ultrasound machines. Until the baby came out of the birth canal, one never knew. I must confess this added to the excitement.

Another thing you will find hard to believe is that in those ancient days, husbands were not allowed to be in the delivery room. I think the nurses got tired of catching fainting husbands. So, it was deemed best if they stayed in the waiting room. In fact, the doctor said to me, “It is going to be several hours, so I think if you would like, you can go back to the church and preach your sermon and then come back; you will have plenty of time.” (He knew that I was pastor at a small church in town.) I was shocked at this suggestion, but thought, “Why not? I can tell the congregation about the good news.”

We discovered that having a baby and caring for a baby are two different things.

So I did. At the end of the sermon, I said, “I will not be at the door to greet you this morning because earlier this morning I took Karolyn to the hospital. The baby should be coming soon, and I am going back to the hospital.” I sensed that the ladies were upset that I had not stayed at the hospital, but after all, I was simply following the doctor’s suggestion.

At any rate, when I got back to the hospital, all was calm in the waiting room. Ten minutes later, the nurse burst into the room and said: “Congratulations, you are the father of a baby girl.” I followed her into the delivery room where I saw our baby lying on Karolyn’s stomach. She said, “It’s a girl, but I couldn’t help it.”

It is amazing what people say in moments like that. I said, “That’s fine, you’re the one who wanted boys, I’m happy with a girl.” The doctor said, “She will have him wrapped around her little finger in no time.” He was right about that!

Two days later we went home with our baby. That is when we discovered that having a baby and caring for a baby are two different things. All those late-night trips to the Dairy Bar to meet Karolyn’s craving for a banana split were much easier when the baby was in her womb. In fact, everything was easier when the baby was in her womb. Now, the baby had to be fed far more often than I had imagined. Karolyn chose to breastfeed for the first several months. I suggest you talk with your doctor, mother, and friends who have walked this road as you make this decision. Breastfeeding does seem to be nature’s way, but there are often issues involved. What you want is what works best for you and your baby.

Then, there is all that mess that happens at the other end of the baby’s body. That too happened far more often than I had imagined. In those “good ole days” we used cloth diapers that had to be washed. Not a pleasant task. We opted for a diaper service. They took the dirty diapers and brought them back clean. Of course, now most couples use disposable diapers—much easier. However, it still takes time, and the smell is not pleasant.

These are the basics: put the food in, take the food out. If you don’t do this, the baby will not live. While these two are necessary, there are all those other hours that must be devoted to the rearing of a child. We hope that as an infant, they will sleep several hours of the day and night. If this happens, you are fortunate parents. This will give you time to cook meals, wash laundry, mow grass, and all those other necessities for adult life together.

Our daughter slept much more than we had anticipated. Even so, we felt compelled to look at her while she was asleep to make sure she was still breathing. We did not know how good we had it until we had our second child, a son, who did not want to waste time sleeping. So he took much more of our time.

We knew the value of tenderly holding our baby. I had read all the research about babies who go hours without tender touch and how their emotional development is hampered. We wanted our baby to feel loved, so we held her often and talked and laughed with her. As she got older we read stories to her long before she understood our words, because we wanted to stimulate her brain with pictures and sound. We wanted to be good parents.

However, all of this took time—much time. In theory, we knew that a child would demand much of our attention, but theory and reality are very different. I wish someone had told us that we would have to change our schedules after the baby arrived.

We had already made one major decision before the baby arrived. Karolyn decided that she would like to be a stay-at-home mom. So we agreed that she would quit her job before the baby

A willingness to admit your limitations and adjust your schedule will keep you from feeling defeated or disappointed with yourself.

was born. With that decision made, I assumed that I would not need to make many changes in my schedule. After all, a “full-time mom” should be able to handle the baby, right?

I was in for a rude awakening. There is a reason why it takes a mom and a dad to create a baby. There is a reason why in marriage we commit ourselves “to love and to cherish” each other. Never will love be more needed than when you have a child. All research

indicates that the healthiest setting in which to raise a child is that created by a mother and father who have a loving, supportive attitude toward each other. My earlier book *The 5 Love Languages*¹ has helped millions of couples create such a loving, caring, supportive relationship. With this kind of relationship, both are willing to adjust schedules to meet the other's needs and the needs of their children.

Another important factor is recognizing our limitations. We cannot do everything. All of us have limitations. A father cannot work out in the gym two hours each day, hold down a full-time job, spend three hours at night on the computer, attend a sports event, or play golf every Saturday and be a loving husband and father. A willingness to admit your limitations and adjust your schedule to include those things that are most important will keep you from feeling defeated or disappointed with yourself. Time, money, energy, and abilities are all limited. Achievable goals lead to celebration when accomplished. Unrealistic goals may lead to depression when we fail to reach such goals.

Important also is developing or maintaining a "we" mentality. Hopefully, even before the baby comes you have shifted from the "I" mentality, which most of us have before marriage. This shift much be made permanent. Parents can no longer think in terms of what "I" am going to do but rather what "we" are going to do. Parenting is a team sport.

Self-sacrifice is another required attitude in making scheduling changes. My coauthor, Shannon, was doing a counseling internship as part of her doctoral training. She met a hospital chaplain who had a PhD degree and had taught at a local university for several years. She explained that she had loved being a mother and intentionally slowed down her career during her

children's childhood so that she could be with them as much as possible and still work. In higher education, this meant that she didn't climb up the tenure ladder as quickly as she might have. For her, parenting was more important than the professional ladder.

Whether it is at work or in other areas of life, parents often experience personal or professional sacrifice to some degree for the sake of their children. Sometimes this sacrifice feels more pronounced; other times parents would not even call it sacrifice.

Adjusting our attitudes and choosing how we will approach parenting is a worthwhile but challenging task. However, living with unrealistic, unachievable expectations and resulting disappointment is undesirable and unproductive.

Making it work

In addition to attitude changes, we also need to take practical steps if we are going to cope with the time demands of being a spouse and parent. Shannon and I have put together the following suggestions, which we feel will help you make needed schedule changes.

1. Get organized.

We know this is problematic for two reasons. First, not everyone is gifted with the ability to organize. This is one of the realities I discovered after I got married. I am extremely organized and my wife is the opposite. Second, it takes time to get organized, and time is one of the limitations we are dealing with in the first place.

However, there are small changes you can make that will pay great dividends. Take a look at your present schedule and ask: What do I anticipate that I might need to change after the baby arrives? Or, if the baby is already in your home, identify the pres-

sure points, and ask: How could I lower the pressure by organizing my time differently?

Maybe you could wake up thirty minutes earlier. Maybe you can work in a half-hour walk during your lunchtime. Maybe you can give your spouse a break by washing the dishes.

2. Get creative.

Your baby will not always be a baby. Sooner than you can imagine you will be doing creative things with them, such as playing pirates or having tea parties. Coloring books will again return to your life. These are just a few examples of the creativity that naturally happens in parenthood. Parents also have to call upon their creative thinking when faced with managing busy family schedules.

Multitasking can be creative, but it may not always be the best for your child. When you are able to take your child with you as you do a routine task such as grocery shopping, you are both accomplishing a necessary task and also exposing your child to a stimulating environment. However, when you are talking with your child while you are sending a text or doing some media-driven activity, you are cheating your child of quality time.

3. Involve others.

Parents often cannot be with their children 24-7 and need the help of trusted others to care for their children. Some parents are fortunate to have family or friends nearby who can help with childcare. Quality nurseries, preschools, and grade schools also play important roles in the lives of some families. Parents may be reluctant to seek help with childcare, especially first-time parents who are anxious about leaving their child for the first time. All parents are wise to explore childcare options and thoroughly evaluate the safety and trustworthiness of those options. With

such effort, and as parents build trust in those caregivers, they gain not only a sense of relief but also a sense of freedom. As one friend said, "I love taking my kids to daycare!" She meant that both as a compliment to the daycare facility and as a personal expression of freedom to accomplish her other responsibilities. She, like many parents, knew firsthand that it truly is a blessing to have help in raising your child.

Shannon and Stephen were fortunate enough to have family nearby. Grandparents are happy to have time with grandchildren (as long as it does not get too long or too often). Karolyn and I did not have parents nearby. However, we had some wonderful friends who were willing to babysit for an hour or so while we did a task. Other wonderful single adult friends stayed with the children as they got older and allowed Karolyn and me to attend conferences and take short trips.

4. *Simplify.*

Any way you slice it, life with children gets hectic. And it gets more hectic as they get older. Once the ball games and piano and dance recitals start, life can become a marathon. At some juncture you will need to simplify. What activities can be eliminated? Life should not be constantly pressured. The human mind and body need rest and time to be free to think, and enjoy the simple things like a sunset, a rainbow, or a bird. One parent said, "This is the first Saturday in a long time that we have nothing to do." Strive for more Saturdays like that!

When our baby was little, Karolyn found that Sunday evening was a wonderful time to relax with the baby. As a pastor, I had Sunday evening responsibilities, but I encouraged her to stay at home. Did all of the congregation understand? No! But most of them did because they stayed at home also. Culture, even Christian

culture, should not control our lives. We are responsible to God and not to culture.

5. Celebrate what's working.

Look for opportunities to affirm each other. By focusing our attention and energy on what is going right, we not only encourage and connect with our spouses and children in more positive ways, we also have an improved perspective on what's not working. We feel like our wins overshadow our losses, and we believe we can work through other challenges that we face.

This list of ideas is certainly not exhaustive. However, these ideas may serve as a useful starting point as you begin actively identifying your family's schedule strengths and limitations. I wish someone had shared these ideas with me before we became parents.

Talking It Over

- 1.** Have a conversation with a couple who gave birth to a child in the past six months and ask how the baby changed their schedule.
- 2.** If both of you are currently working full-time, have you discussed whether or not you will make vocational changes after the baby is born? Have you made any decisions yet?
- 3.** If each of you decides to continue your full-time vocation, what childcare options do you anticipate?
- 4.** Make a list of the major activities each of you does with your "free time"—such things as golf, gym routine, video games, hobbies, Facebook, etc. Do you anticipate cutting back on any of these after the baby arrives?

- 5.** Make a list of the normal household chores that are done on a regular basis and who presently does each of them. List such things as purchasing groceries, cooking, washing dishes, sweeping or vacuuming the floor, cleaning the toilet and shower, etc. Do you anticipate changing roles on any of these?
- 6.** How willing are you to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of your child?