

There is a Way to Set Priorities: "Always Put the Big 'Rocks' in the Jar First, ... "

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BOZEMAN - -National surveys report that today's parents spend 40 percent less time with children than they did 30 years ago. One reason for this trend offered by social demographers is that "the value of family has steadily been chipped away" at all stages of life. Competing values of self-fulfillment and materialism have become relatively stronger. In spite of this, most Americans loudly affirm family values. The family ideal still exists for most of us.

If you are like most Americans, you likewise affirm the value of family. But if you're like me, you struggle to spend a sufficient amount of time with family members, notwithstanding your belief in placing family first.

One song asks a very poignant question of you and I: "Are you giving the least to those who matter most, or are you sharing the best with those that really aren't that close?" If family is our top priority, as our opinions suggest, what can we do to help ensure that we are "sharing our best" at home?

I've found something that I think can help us while watching a news report recently. One family used the idea of "big rocks" and "little rocks" to help them organize the activities of a busy week. "Big rock" items were the activities that were considered to be the most important ones. "Little rock" items were the less important things. This process helped the family to keep first things first. The television reporter showed how this works visually. You might try this at home with your family. Collect a half-dozen large rocks and a jar full of pea-size little rocks. Take a wide mouth glass jar and fill it with little rocks. Then try to squeeze your big rocks in.

Notice what happens.

There isn't any room for the big rocks.

Repeat the process but this time put the big rocks in first followed by the little rocks. Notice how the little rocks fill in the area around the big rocks.

The idea is that we can actually get more done if we put our "big rock" activities in first.

If some of those activities include time with family members, putting them in first helps ensure that they don't get crowded out by other, less important activities.

In real life, everyone begins a week with an "empty jar," defined as 168 hours of time from Monday through Sunday.

You can hold a weekly planning meeting to decide what to put in that 168-hour jar.

Deciding what is most important to you is easier if you have a shared vision of where you're going together.

Consider developing a family mission statement that reflects your family's core values. A family mission statement might be created during a family meeting or over a meal.

My family recently developed a mission statement.

I began by asking my family to imagine we were carried off by aliens from another planet. Then I asked, "How would we want to be remembered by our fellow earthlings?"

We "brain stormed" many ideas and eventually summarized them into one mission statement that we all agreed on: "Our mission is to be a successful family through service and kindness to others, developing and sharing talents, learning, sharing our love for our faith and having lots of fun." The youngsters were especially excited about the last part.

Based on your family's vision and mission statement, review the coming week's responsibilities and opportunities and schedule important "big rock" activities first. These might include birthday celebrations, homework assignments, music practice, family outings, parent-child "one-on-one" time, "date night" for parents and other things. Then fit less important demands, the "little rocks," around them.

Putting our big rocks first may not be the only answer. But it may go a long way to ensure that we are giving our best to those persons and activities that matter the most to us.

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