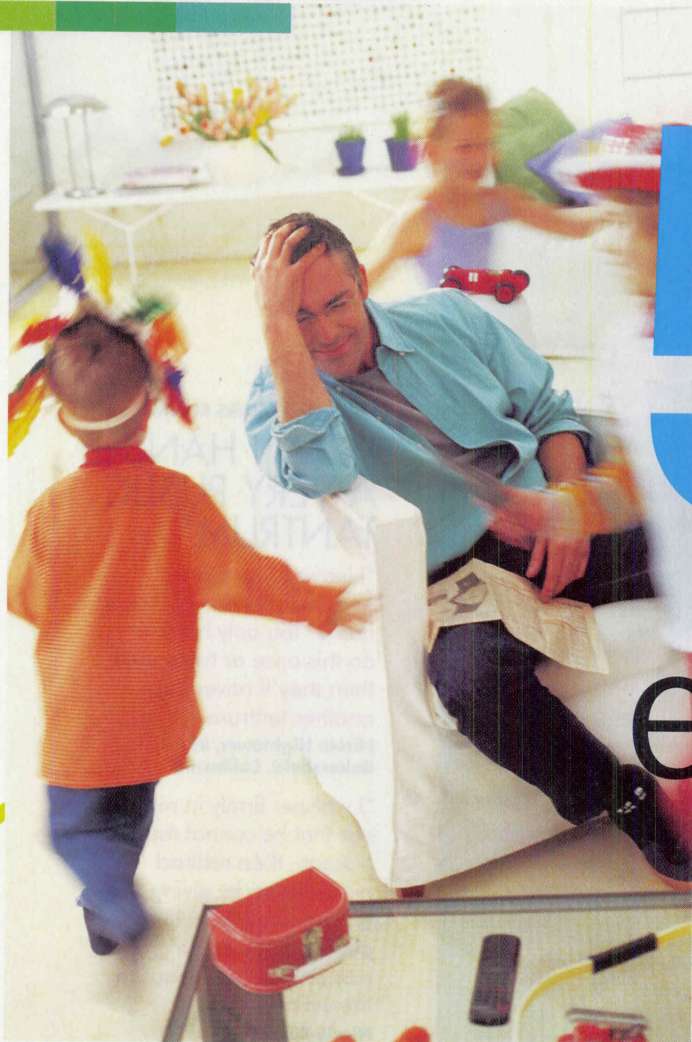


BY HILLARY QUINN



5 steps to calmer evenings

From homework to dinner, the early evening hours can be full of gotta-get-it-done stress. Here's how to make them family time, not frantic time.

It's 6 p.m., and Beth Bratt is doing what she refers to as "the nightly shuffle."

In the family room, her son and husband have the game blaring on TV and are impatient for dinner. Six-year-old Abby is anxious to show Mom her reading skills at the kitchen counter. And Beth is attempting to put aside her day at the office so she can focus on the task at hand, which includes making sure the pasta water—and her patience—doesn't boil over. "When everyone wants a piece of me, and I haven't really let go of the agenda from my day, it's touch-and-go for a little while," says this Edmonds, Washington-based mom. "I want a nice evening with my kids, but it's hard not to lose it when there's a million things going on at once."

Whether you work outside the house or stay at home full-time, the toughest part of the day is the same: those frantic early evening hours when there are mouths to feed, homework to do, and cranky kids to handle. The trick is to streamline your to-do's so you can feel calmer and focus on what counts—spending time with your family. Here's how.

1. ease into the evening

Instead of walking in the door after work or errands and immediately launching into another chore, allow time and space to downshift into evening mode. "What we are dealing

with here is the need for transition," explains Julie Morgenstern, author of *Time Management from the Inside Out*. "Giving yourself and your family that unwind time can completely change the feel of the evening."

Creating a calming ambience—by, say, turning off the TV and playing soothing classical, jazz, or instrumental music—can instantly reset the emotional tone of the house. Kim Hall, of Mukilteo, Washington, uses lighting to keep the calm: "Every afternoon, I turn on the gas fireplace, light a few candles, and dim the lights—it makes for a warm, cozy atmosphere that relaxes my family the minute they walk in."

A fun ritual can also ease everyone into family time. Beth does the occasional "cocktail hour," setting veggies and dip or cheese and bread on the counter and serving juice or water in fancy wine goblets. "Not only does this take the ravenous edge off, so we avoid meltdowns before dinner, but it feels special and establishes transition time," she says.

2. create a dinner system

Rushing to get dinner on the table—and the last-minute "What am I making?!" freak-out that goes with it—is a major source of evening mayhem, but a little bit of preplanning can help you power through with a minimum of stress. Morgenstern recommends using the weekends to chart out

your nightly dinners, grocery shop, and even pre-assemble parts of a meal when possible. Consider writing a weekly plan and checking the calendar to see which nights are going to be particularly busy—so you know when frozen pizza or easy-prep meals are a must. (You can download a form to help you do this at redbookmag.com.) Next, post the week's schedule on the refrigerator, where you can easily see what's on the horizon long before the dinner hour hits.

To make things even easier, build some simple shortcuts into your menu. Sandra Lee, host of *Semi-Homemade Cooking with Sandra Lee* on the Food Network, recommends stocking your pantry with quick-and-easy flavoring packets. "A taco-seasoning packet can flavor up beans and salsa, fajitas, or chili. A packet of pickling spice is perfect for making an incredible, herb-crusted steak," she explains. Lee also advocates doctoring up canned food: A simple can of cheese soup goes south-of-the-border with taco seasoning, sour cream, and avocado; chicken stock gets enhanced with frozen veggies, shredded rotisserie chicken, and refrigerated biscuit dough for instant chicken-and-dumplings. "These kinds of semi-homemade meals have become from-scratch cooking for the modern woman," says Lee.

3. keep the kids busy

All the shortcuts in the world won't help if you're constantly being interrupted, so a little creativity may be needed to get the kids out from underfoot. Beth Bratt encourages her family to take their pre-dinner "cocktails" into the family room for some quiet time. "The understanding is that this is Mom's kitchen time, and dinner will happen faster when I'm in there by myself," Bratt explains.

With children younger than 5, you might find it easier to involve them in what you're doing. In Jon Weiman's Randolph, New Jersey, home, cooking time has become a ritual for 2-year-old Hani, who has been known to hurl a sippy cup across the room when she's ignored.

"She hates being left out of the cooking process," explains Weiman, "so I make a game of having her watch and 'help' me make dinner. I pull her high chair up close so she can see what I'm doing, give her a piece of bread, and explain everything in an animated way—sort of my own version of *Emeril Live!*"

4. plan homework time

To avoid last-minute cries of "Mom, I haven't done my homework yet," institute some planning in the academic department as well. Julie Morgenstern recommends providing a comforting, reliable workspace for your children—and a set hour in which to do homework. "If your kids like to study on the living room floor, clear out a cabinet in the entertainment center for pens, paper, and books, and keep it well-stocked," she says.

helping kids help you

Encouraging your children to do tasks around the house each evening not only takes the edge off those stressful hours, it also increases kids' self-esteem and independence, explains Elizabeth Bailey, a family therapist in New York City. "Yes, it's sometimes easier to do things for kids, but in the long run, that actually deprives them of a whole set of skills that can make them proud of themselves." Here, some of the ways real REDBOOK parents get their kids to share the load.

- "After school, I allow my 8-year-old daughter to decompress in front of the TV for up to an hour. But then I shut it off and she helps me tidy up the house, unload the dishwasher, set the table, and pour drinks so I can focus on dinner. For doing all this, I pay her an allowance. I know she likes it because I heard her bragging to friends about 'all her responsibility'—and her growing bank account!" Deidre Timmons, 38, Seattle
- "When my 6-year-old daughter was a toddler, I always let her 'help' with the bath routine. I'd take her clothes off, and she'd put them in the laundry hamper. Then I'd take the diaper off, tape it up, and she'd carry it to the diaper pail and drop it in. To this day, I never have to ask her to put her dirty clothes away." Anna Goodman, 41, New York
- "When I empty the dishwasher each night, I have my 18-month-old daughter take the plates out from the bottom rack. She also enjoys taking the clothes out of the front-loading washer and putting them in the dryer. This makes her feel like she's got my undivided attention, yet we're both doing 'chores.'" Sharon Semones, 30, Greenwood, Indiana
- "I established a ten-minute, before-bed cleanup routine for my 6- and 2-year-olds. We put on music to make it fun, and I assign tasks, like 'put those blocks in that box,' to each of them while we dance around. It's really helped my sanity, and gets the house clutter-free for the next day." Kristle Mathison, 33, Ballston Spa, New York

Soothing music can instantly reset the emotional tone of the house.

When setting your kids' homework time, be sure to take into account your *own* tolerance for multitasking. If your kids are younger and need more help with their homework, having them do it while you cook dinner means you'll be constantly running back and forth. "Anticipate their need for attention and spend homework time doing a task that you can easily break away from, like reading a magazine or folding laundry," says Morgenstern.

5. share the work...and a break

Dividing tasks between you and your husband can make family time more serene for both of you. Michael Pfeffer of Honolulu, knows that when he walks in the door, it's his turn to take baby Asa for 30 minutes, so his wife, Lacey, can get dinner started. "The baby is happy to see him, and it gives me time to pull dinner together, have a much-needed glass of wine, and take a small break," Lacey explains. "When I take Asa back, my husband gets his half hour to change and unwind, and then we're both refreshed enough to start our evening together."

Your guy might not exactly be volunteering for more evening duties, but asking him to do something within his comfort zone can help. If your husband is stressed when he first walks in the house, offer him a later-in-the-evening task, such as washing dishes while you're putting the kids to bed. If he doesn't mind helping with homework but is useless in the cooking department, consider making dinner while *he* hits the tutoring table. And remember, too, that it's okay to switch off; what works initially may grow tiresome after months of daily repetition. □