

# SANTI SAYS: Parenting is a tough job

By Santi Meunier

Parenting is perhaps the toughest job on earth...and probably the most important. Although love and care are essential ingredients for a healthy family, they are not enough. The family needs a structure just like any well-run organization. Communication, appreciation, respect, boundaries, accountability, quality time, commitment and spiritual wellness are important core qualities for strong, healthy families. Regardless of an individual family's cultural, political or ethnic differences the core qualities remain the same.

## Over stimulating lifestyles

Many parents may read this long list and feel overwhelmed from the get go. We are living in a stressful, fast-paced time in history and all indications point to it getting more intense rather than subsiding. Many families have both parents working so children are in extended daycare and after school programs. Children and parents alike are bombarded with stimulation through the mail, the Internet, television and publications.

## Don't be a victim to schedules

How do we learn to sort it all out and prioritize what really matters in life. It starts with the decision not to be victims of our schedules and to begin taking back control one step at a time. If we don't take the time to deepen the quality of our family relationships, time will speed by as we endlessly try to manage the chaos. As Shakespeare once said,

"full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." It doesn't have to be that way no matter how busy your life is now.

## Incorporating the core qualities into your family

**Communication** begins when we realize that even if we are all from the same family we do not all speak the same language. Taking the time to understand the differences between family members and teaching each other about ourselves is an important first step.

When discussing differences or trying to resolve a conflict, don't make assumptions or jump to conclusions. Establish ground rules. Let the other person finish what they are sharing before you reply. Interrupting is a sure sign that you are not listening. It often makes people clam up and not want to talk anymore. Good communication results in all parties feeling heard and understood, regardless of differences in point of view.

Try using "I feel..." statements instead of "you make me feel..." statements. The former is a description of one's own experience; the latter is an accusation that invites a defensive reaction. In family or couples therapy, we often have the "listening" party repeat what they have heard to make sure that it is accurate, before responding. This technique creates an atmosphere of respect not just for the person but also for your agreement to resolve conflict amicably.

**Appreciation and respect** is shown through our day-to-

day actions towards one another. Telling someone when he or she has done something that you appreciate, no matter how little, is essential. How many times do we complain about what someone is not doing or doing poorly, compared to the amount of praise and positive evaluation? Praise when it is well founded, makes that person want to do more because we all love to be complimented. If, however, the praise it is not based on truth or it is used to try to manipulate the person it will not work. We all know when something is genuine.

Respect for every member of the family regardless of their age is also important. Double standards breed resentment and that often leads to disrespect and cynicism. Go within and remember that if you don't appreciate yourself it will be very hard to appreciate anyone else.

**Boundaries and accountabilitys** are critical tools for teaching people how to have high quality relationships in all areas of their lives. Boundaries begin with sharing what you are available for in a relationship or within the family and what you are not available for. The "rules" for the household need to be clear and fair. Everyone should be held accountable for their words and deeds. Family meetings held weekly can be short and sweet if run correctly. It is a time when everyone in the family shares for about five minutes their experiences for that week, self-evaluating both the positive and the neg-



*Santi Meunier, MA, a Jamestown resident, earned her masters in Counseling Psychology from Norwich University. She has written three books, produced a film and founded Connections to Life, a nonprofit that provides support, comfort and inspiration to cancer patients and their caregivers. She founded Galactica Institute for Personal Development, counseling service.*

ative. There is no cross discussion and the parents participate as well.

**Quality time** is time dedicated to simply being together. We turn off the cell phones, the computers, radios and televisions and any other distractions that may be around to "be" together. A little can go a long way when we stop rushing and managing time and sit and really look at one another. Every child I have ever seen for counseling has shared that they wished their parents would spend more time with them. "Not doing"

is often a lot harder to learn in this day and age than "doing". Time is said to be the most important thing you can give someone because no matter how rich you are you can't buy more time.

**Commitment** is following through on your word and making your family and loved ones the priority. We can have a full, productive life but if it is at the expense of our relationships it will be hollow. Holding to our commitments, even when it is tough builds character and deepens the value of the relationship. Self-esteem comes from doing admirable things and loving relationships stem from doing loving things.

**Spiritual wellness**, regardless of a particular religion, stems from a belief in the goodness of all things and respect for all that inhabits the earth. It gives the family system a code of conduct, and open-mindedness to the different cultures and customs, and promotes a sense of service to the community to those in need. It is the love that has been developed within the family that can then spill over to the community in loving, kindness and sharing.

## Toughest job on earth

Yes, parenting is the toughest job on earth but it is also the most rewarding. The job we do as parents help shape the very fabric of our society.

Thank you all  
*Santi*