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Child

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR TODAY'S PARENTS

KIDS' HEALTH REPORT
Alternative Solutions for
Colds, Pain, and More

Special Series

A Balanced Life, Part II

by

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mind

your

"HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE" with husband Dan, Cindy Sescleifer shared his boundless joy when their first baby arrived. But Cindy, of Edwardville, Illinois, wasn't at all ready for what happened next. "Whenever Dan tried to hold me, I would push him away," she recalls, the shock still reverberating in her voice years later. "I was tired all the time. I guess I felt all touched out."

Stories like the Sescleifers' are familiar to researchers who have tracked couples' transition to parenthood. The birth of a child can make any couple feel exhilarated and united. Sooner or later, though, as partners struggle to care for their newborn as well as get through another day at home or at work, they may find themselves losing their sense of close connection. "Some nights we're so busy taking care of the boys, we don't get to say one word to each other," one mother of two small sons sadly concludes.

"Marital satisfaction tends to go down after the birth of the first child," confirms William Pollack, Ph.D., assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts. After conducting a five-year study of couples' experiences once they started having children, Dr. Pollack found that new parenthood is practically guaranteed to send shock waves through a marriage. And his conclusion is mirrored by many other researchers as well.

Maybe you have felt this shake-up in your own relationship but haven't wanted to admit it. Well, join the club.

Many new moms and dads don't talk about this sea change in their marriage. Yet it's a universal challenge that you can definitely overcome with a little insight into how it happens in the first place.

What Throws a Marriage Off Center

Why are so many couples ambushed by new parenthood? "Because they're experiencing a priority shift that is very powerful—but also very subtle," says Yolanda Bruce Brooks, Psy.D., a clinical and consulting psychologist in Dallas. During pregnancy, couples usually have an inkling that a baby will infringe on their time together. "But

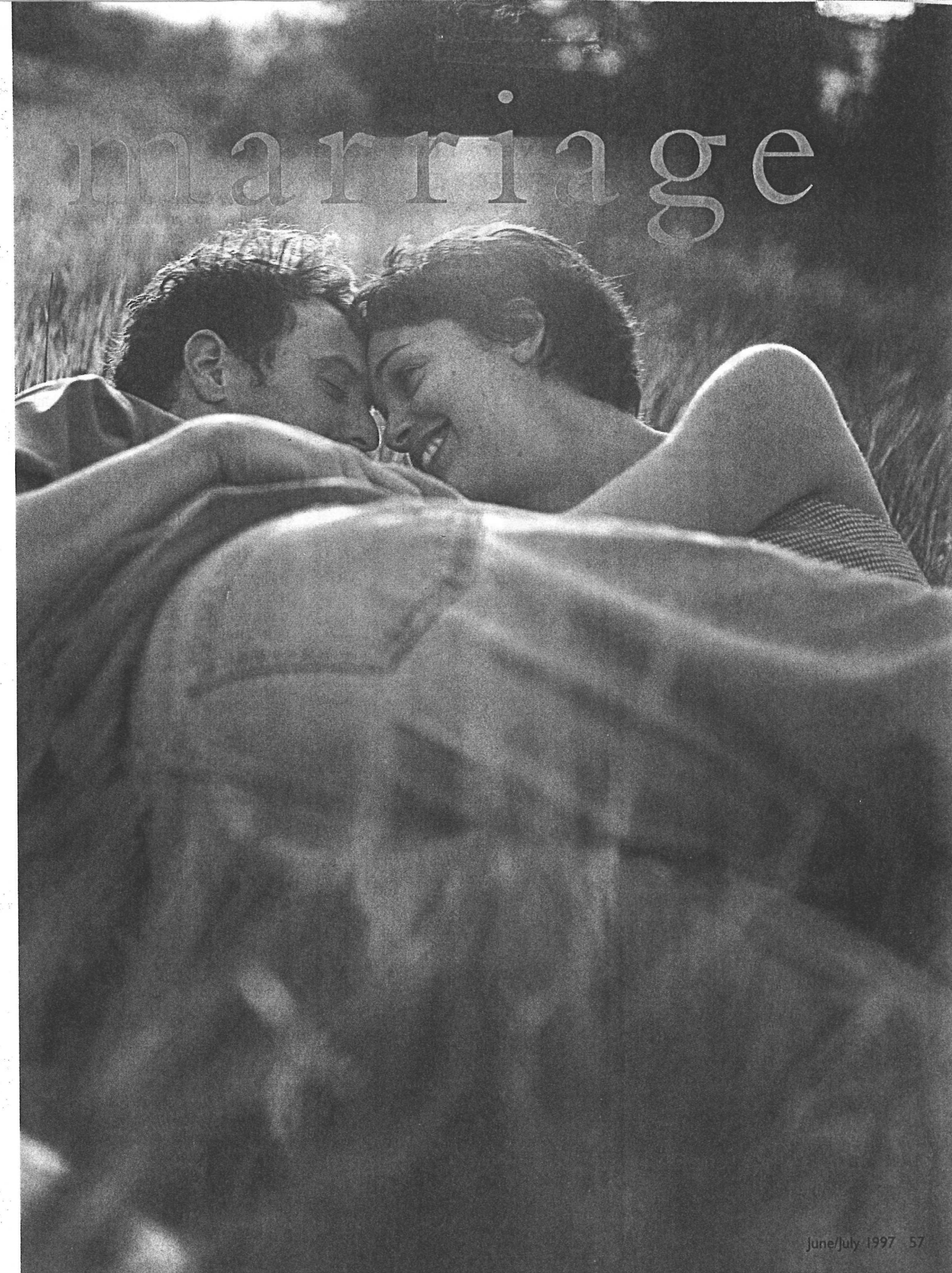
No couple time in sight?
Here are smart (and sneaky)
ways to reconnect with
your partner. BY MELINDA BLAU

READ THIS ARTICLE...

...if you've been feeling less close to your spouse since you two became parents.

...if you never seem to get around to talking about the changes in your relationship.

...if couple time is much harder to come by than it used to be.



steal kisses

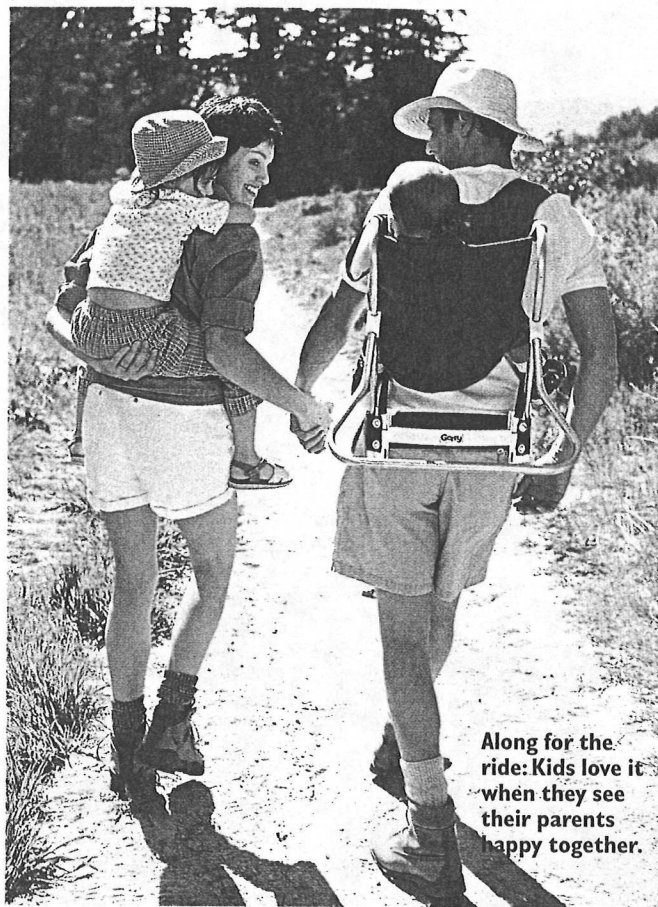
How else will you ever find time for love?

what's *not* so obvious is what you'll have to give up," she continues. Leisurely dinners for two become a distant memory. So does spontaneous sex. And the toll of sleepless nights may leave you too exhausted to sort out what is happening as you and your partner routinely miss out on each other's company. It's no wonder that your marriage, which may once have ranked first in importance in your life, can slip way down to third or fourth place.

Unfortunately, relatives often live too far away to slide in as emergency babysitters when you're desperate for some couple time. And while employers and politicians may *talk* about being family friendly, they haven't adopted reforms that make juggling work and family any easier, according to Betty Carter, the White Plains, New York-based co-author of *Love, Honor, and Negotiate*. But on the positive side, Carter observes, "you can still make changes that are good for your marriage *and* good for you."

Achieving an Emotional Balance

Couples who face up to, rather than ignore, the changes in their relationship fare best during the transition to parenthood. "Even if things are going well, you should talk about how you're doing," says Dr. Pollack. Try to figure out what kind of emotional "food" you both need to keep your relationship well nourished and healthy, adds Patricia Hudson, Ph.D., a psychologist in Grapevine, Texas. "Don't assume that your husband is a mind reader when it comes to knowing how you want him to show his love. You might have to tell him you want more compliments or more help with the baby," Dr. Hudson says. When your spouse responds in the way you want,



Along for the ride: Kids love it when they see their parents happy together.

from her spouse that she should pursue an outside interest such as gardening or community volunteering. And a husband who is always at the office might need a wake-up call to rejoin the family ranks. Rather than putting the job first, says Carter, "some couples need to think about working less and coming together more."

Three Kinds of Couple Time

If you're like other new parents, you and your spouse often act as a childcare "tag team," handing off the baby to each other. So you wind up babysitting on Saturday morning while your husband goes out for an invigorating run. Then he takes over on Sunday afternoon so you can attend a girlfriend's baby shower. But how do you get time for *each other*? Here are three ways to do just that.

1. SCHEDULED TIME

is the kind you mark on a calendar and observe without fail, such as a regular Wednesday-night date. "You cannot be spontaneous about it," says Dr. Brooks. "You have to sit down with your datebook and schedule it in." And if you work outside the home, she adds, don't make the mistake of trying to compensate by never taking any time away from the kids to be with your husband. Going to a quiet place where the two of you can talk, such as a restaurant or a park, helps guarantee that heart-to-heart sharing will happen. If your budget won't allow you to hire a sitter each week, think about other parents you know who might be willing to swap babysitting time so that they can get some couple time, too.

Cami and Howard Gordon of Pacific Palisades, California, parents of Micah, 4, and Arlo, 1, have a standing bimonthly date to talk in a therapist's office during Howard's lunch hour. "I make him a sandwich, and we use the appointments

"let him know you've noticed," she continues. "Reinforcing behavior you like—with thanks and affection—is much more effective than pointing out what your husband is *not* doing."

If you're feeling anger toward your spouse, you need to find ways to express that, too, rather than letting it fester. After arguing with her husband, Cindy Sescleifer sat down and wrote him an impassioned letter describing her feeling that he was unfairly passing along his job frustrations to her. "I may not even show him the letter," she says. "The important thing is, I felt better after writing it."

Anything you can do to feel in balance as an individual is good for your marriage, says Dr. Pollack. "Men need to feel they're doing important work at home as well as at work," he notes. "And women have to feel they've got something besides home and family in their lives."

A wife who gives every moment over to her family might need a reminder

ISN'T IT ROMANTIC? True tales of love

KEY TO HIS HEART. "After our third child was born, I would try to meet my husband Durado after work for a drink once a week. One time we met in a beautiful hotel lounge, and I began flirting with him. After a while he said, almost jokingly, 'Maybe we ought to get a room here,' at which point I pulled out a hotel key. He was shocked. We stayed for several hours and then went home to the kids." —Yolanda Bruce Brooks, Dallas

SOME LIKE IT HOT. "Dan and I decided to pick out a recipe and cook together. There was something really special about his standing next to me, chopping vegetables, which he almost never does. We talked a lot, and he was just so attentive. It was kind of like a kiss. It made me feel so loved." —Cindy Sescleifer, Edwardville, IL

THE GETAWAY. "My husband Michael 'kidnapped' me one Memorial Day weekend for an unknown destination. He made all the plans, including farming out the kids. We drove to a quaint little bed-and-breakfast place in California wine country. This wasn't Michael's idea of romance—he'd rather go sailing! But he'd arranged for bike rentals and even side-by-side massages. He did it all for me!" —Dale Gregory, San Leandro, CA

OF SPECIAL NOTE. "Before going on one of his business trips, my husband Andy left a little note for each of us. Our son Houston's note read, 'Be a good boy, Houston. When I get home we'll wrestle.' Our daughter Haley's note said, 'Be a good girl for Mommy, Haley. I can't wait to chase you around the house when I get back.' And to me, my husband wrote, 'Sally, be a bad girl. Then, when I get home, I'll chase you around the house and we'll wrestle. Love, Andy.'" —Sally Rivero, Vero Beach, FL

LOVE BLOSSOMS. "When I went on my first business trip as a new mom, my baby, Daniel, was only 3 months old. I left on a cold and dreary day, and I remember feeling very sad and lonely as I checked into my solitary hotel room with my breast pump—I was still nursing. But when I walked into my room, the first thing I saw was a big bouquet of flowers. The card said, 'We miss you. What a thoughtful thing for my husband Michael to do!'" —Barbara Rosenberg, Fort Worth, TX

as a time to connect," says Cami. Therapy has been a way for the Gordons to explore how their separate worlds—he is a TV producer, she is a home-based mom who writes children's books—can combine. "The therapist has helped us see that despite our very different roles, we have the same basic goal: a healthy, happy family," Cami says. And since the sessions started, Cami has enjoyed hearing Howard say that he appreciates what she does at home "more than ever."

Scheduling sex makes sense as well, according to Dr. Hudson. "That doesn't sound very romantic," she admits. "But how else are you going to work it into your busy lives?" Even if you're not feeling "in the mood," you can still help each other to get over that. "If you start massaging and touching each other, very often your body wakes up!" Dr. Hudson adds.

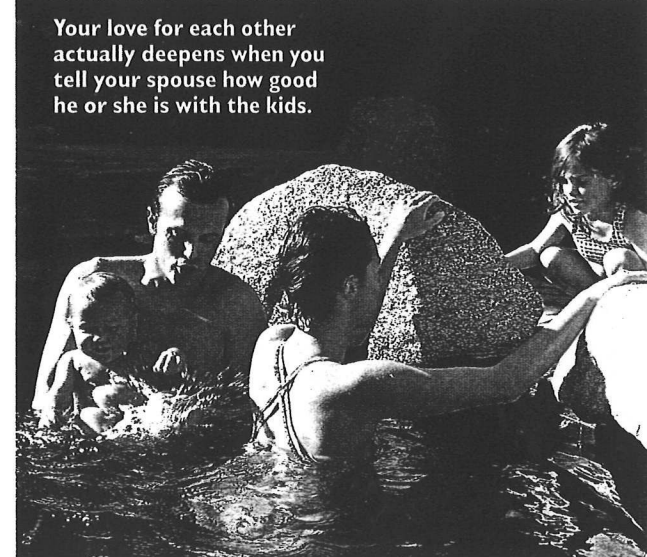
2. SHARED TIME works much as scheduled time does, except that instead of targeting "dates" on your calendar, you keep opportunities for togetherness in mind and seize them as often as you can.

For Susan and Ken Raisch, parents of four in Staten Island, New York, shared time usually comes in the morning, when they rise a half hour earlier than their kids so they can greet the day together quietly. For Cami and Howard Gordon,

phone chats are a way of sharing time. They call each other as often as three times a day. Joan and Joshua Kagan of New York City, parents of David, 3, and Andrew, 1, often connect after their boys are in bed. "That's when we find out what's going on with each other," she says. There are also Saturday mornings spent at their synagogue, where the Kagans reconnect with other families in the community as well as with each other.

Shared time might also include rituals that have special meaning for you and your spouse, such as taking "candy-bar breaks" together if you share a passion for chocolate. Or if you're the type who remembers the "firsts" in your relationship—such as the day you met, or the first time you kissed—you might use these mini-anniversaries as an excuse to clink glasses once the kids are in bed.

3. STOLEN TIME is a little different because it's spontaneous, surprising, even sneaky. Maybe you pop in on your husband at his office and announce, "Surprise! I'm taking you out to lunch!" Or you begin an intimate conversation as soon as your kids fall asleep during a family car trip. "It's great because you're not distracted by sibling scraps or ringing phones," notes Cathy Ramiza of Oneonta, New York, mother of Jacob, 2, and Zachary, 4. Another sneaky tactic is to accompany your spouse on a routine errand that requires only one of you. When Lisa Ryerson, a mother of three children who is president of Wells College in Aurora, New York, took her baby to the pediatrician recently, her husband



Your love for each other actually deepens when you tell your spouse how good he or she is with the kids.

went along for the ride just so he could visit with Lisa along the way.

One of the Raisches' favorite strategies is having "a romantic, grownup dinner for ourselves—in the house but away from the children," Susan reports. "We cook something new, play music, light candles, and set up our own dining area where the kids can see us." Far from being cranky about their parents' separate feast, "the children get a kick out of it," Susan says. "They love seeing us happy—and together." ■

Coming next month: Our special series concludes with Part III, "Balancing Work and Family."

Contributing editor Melinda Blau lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, and often writes about family trends.