

## ***Going it Alone*, by Karen Spring**

*“Let me get this right. You both work full time, raise kids and live in different states during the week and see each other only on weekends?”*

My friends and co-workers often comment in disbelief that my husband and I decided to live in different states during the week. We both pursue our own career opportunities without disrupting our children’s lives. We are not alone. Many families choose this non-traditional road. More and more children are being raised on a day-to-day basis by one parent. Regardless of the circumstances, if you find yourself parenting your child alone often during evenings, then you probably struggle with the same issue that I do; how do I create a sense of family for my children? Let the Montessori philosophy guide you.

### **Operate as a family regardless if all family members are present.**

You need to remember that you are still a family, even if both parents are not at home. I find that I work even more diligently to instill this sense of family as my children move into their elementary and middle school years. Here is what works for us:

#### **Keep a Consistent Routine**

Our routine stays consistent week to week. I serve dinner between 5:30pm –6:00pm every night. The activities prior to dinner and after dinner fluctuate each day but the mealtime is consistent. My children alternate turns reading in the *Family Celebrations* book of prayers, poems and toasts by June Cotner. I never ask, but one child always reaches for the book, because the ritual is important to them. I feel grateful to their Montessori teachers for reinforcing our family values at school. They teach my children the importance of self-reflection, ritual and communication.

My family talks about the highs and lows of the day, current events or upcoming plans. We enjoy sitting, relaxing and grounding ourselves once again in family. The rule is no phones, television, or radio during dinner. We leave the table together after the meal is finished, not one at a time. Every Thursday we have our “special night out” for dinner. We rotate turns to choose the restaurant. I almost always choose the nice fish restaurant downtown while my kids prefer the local hamburger joint or pizza place. Regardless of the cuisine, this night out is definitely a highlight of our week. My friend, Michelle, prefers to make Tuesday nights her “Family game night”. Her family rotates the choice of games. Either way, a special night during the week for a family-oriented activity breaks up the sometimes monotony of routine. I started this ritual with my children as young toddlers!

## **Downplay the Goodbyes**

I think a tendency of parents is to overplay the goodbyes. The child's left to feel the weight of the departure. My family says a brief goodbye as if my husband's leave for the week is not a big deal. I believe it too! I project an attitude that while we all miss Daddy, we manage well and feel very happy for him and his work.

## **Brace Yourself for the Reentry**

We love when my husband comes home but it takes a bit of time to adjust to the reentry. Expect some difficulty initially. It's normal! The kids and I get so busy with life that we need to remember to stay welcoming and flexible upon his arrival. Don't make plans initially. Allow your spouse to get settled without the frenzied race to get him/her caught up at once with the week's events, bills, and kids' activities. The slower the pace of reentry the quicker the integration occurs, naturally and lovingly. Talk to your kids about the reentry and help them understand the needs of each family member. My daughter often creates a family schedule, before the weekend. This way we look forward to the weekend's events and not the worries about time constraints. Montessori education enhances children's love to plan, organize and take on the leadership role in their families. I see this drive in my own children everyday!

## **Communicate Daily**

This non-traditional road to family life works well because of technology. Take advantage of the means to communicate with each other regularly. My children know that they can call their Dad on his cell phone at any time. They memorized the phone number long ago and can call without asking me. They both email him on a frequent basis and converse on their friendships, homework, events, and troubles. My children attach class work for their Dad to see through email. I marvel at the quality of the communication, the kids enjoy with Tim, versus me. Mine often sounds like nagging; *did you set the table? Is your homework done? Did you brush your teeth?* Sometimes, I wonder if my husband's relationship with our children is strengthened by his travel versus hindered by it!

## **Simplify Where Possible**

The fact is you can't be in two places at the same time. Consider the entire family when making decisions. Schedule extracurricular activities wisely and remember that "less" is almost always "more" when it comes to raising kids.

I also find cooking two meals over the weekend helps me stay calm and enjoy my evenings. I can often enlist my children for assistance if we cook on a Sunday. My husband helps too! I love coming home from work and putting a baked ziti in the oven or heating up some deliciously prepared grilled chicken. My husband almost always makes me a seasonal soup for lunches during the week. He feels good about being a part of our family meals through sharing in the preparation.

## **Let Me Do it Myself!**

Montessori children love their independence. You should allow your children to maximize their capabilities while minimizing your workload. My children began making their breakfasts by age 6. My daughter continues to cook hot cereal everyday while my son heats up pancakes or French toast in the microwave. They organize their own work, and put their dishes in the dishwasher when they are finished eating breakfast. They set the table for dinner and assist in the clean up after our meals. They alternate feeding our dog, Lucy, and take the garbage and recycling cans to the curb. They contribute to the household as responsible, capable family members.

## **Address Issues Together as Parents**

My husband usually cannot attend conferences with me. Tim and I prefer to arrange meetings with teachers when he can. The reality is that this often isn't possible. We make it work by engaging in a lot of discussion. I ask Tim for questions, concerns and comments prior to attending the conference. I share the discussion in depth after the conference. I feel supported and Tim feels included. The key is that I think as a team when I am parenting. I value his opinion and seek his contribution every time. I don't address big issues with my children without consulting him. I don't have to be in the same room to allow my husband to be an involved father.

## **The Importance of a Positive Attitude**

Unfortunately I didn't enjoy a Montessori education so I must say that sometimes I feel incapable of home maintenance and some other household responsibilities. I get frustrated and then remember to get resourceful and seek help. I manage but the secret is to stay positive. Once I slip up emotionally and feel guilty, or angry, my kids sense it and our whole system gets off track. I am keenly aware that my own sense of self and feeling grounded as a person are most important to making our lifestyle work successfully. I exercise, eat healthy, indulge a bit, sleep enough and stay social with my friends to stay positive and fulfilled.

And, as I've heard over and over at my Montessori school from teachers, "*if you're okay, your kids are okay!*"

