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## Hold the Phone! Stay Connected to Your Kids

 by **Gina Hagler**

We live in an era when there's no excuse for anyone to be unavailable at any time. There are cell phones, PDAs, beepers, wireless networks — you name it. Couple this ease of access with home-based businesses, work-from-home arrangements, long commutes and a plethora of after-school and weekend activities for our kids, and we've got a blurring of the boundary between family time and work time that can grind down even the most resilient parent.

Let's face it. When it's your PDA blinking, your cell phone trilling, your beeper vibrating when you shop for groceries, it's not that easy to continue explaining to your preschooler that, while an apple and a banana don't appear to have much in common, they are, in fact, both fruit. The urgency of the electronic device can't help but tug at your attention, and the reality is that devoting complete attention to your child 24/7 is neither possible nor desirable. So where do we draw the line in this culture of distraction?

For me the obvious starting point is with personal phone calls when my kids and I are having our face time — defined as in the car, at the grocery or in a coffeehouse. Given that there are days when I spend more waking time in my car than in my home, what occurs there is key. I rarely take a call from a client or a friend when I'm in my car with my kids, and if I do, the conversation is brief. I don't initiate phone calls from my car when my kids are with me. Period. It's not a matter of safety, although that is a consideration; it's a matter of respect for my kids. I expect the same back from them. No one is riding along listening to an individual music selection. No one is riding around lost in a video game. There are no movies playing in my car unless it's a long trip and it's dark outside.

It's easy for me to make and enforce this policy because I'm certain that time in the family car is custom-made for staring out the window, reading a book, drawing, bickering with a sibling and/or arguing about what should be playing on the radio. We're not individuals who happen to be riding in the same automobile. We're a family forging relationships that will last us a lifetime as we share the experience of traveling in the car. Yes, there are some days when anything goes, and everything from homework to video games ride along, but those days are few and far between.

I'm not entirely sure why, but my kids consider a trip to the grocery store an exciting outing. It might be a reflection of how boring our life is, but I also think it has to do with the opportunity for us to interact in a different environment. With them racing around sampling food and bringing back things they'd like for the week, the last thing I'm going to do is chat on the phone with a friend. My kids are trying to interact with me. Why would I treat my kids as if someone who isn't even present is consistently more important than they are when they're the ones standing right in front of me asking me a question?

Similarly, each of my kids has loved the time we've spent having milk and lattes. It's their chance to be part of the grown-up scene and share what's on their mind. To me, it's just plain rude to expect them to *hold that thought* while I take call after call on my cell phone. Not only does that implicitly tell them that it's just fine to sit across the table from someone and ignore that person completely, it tells them whatever they have to say cannot possibly be as important or urgent as what my friend is saying in a casual conversation. Since I have no interest in raising kids who are certain their own mother doesn't care what they have to say, we've agreed that if the phone rings, we check to see if it's an emergency with a sibling and then continue on with our conversation.

The distinction between being with our children and focusing on our children is becoming lost. Our kids need to see that we consider them important enough to have our attention when we're with them on whatever excursions we as a family decide constitute face time. Sure, there are moments when the cell phone is going to take priority, but those moments need to be the exception rather than the rule if our children are going to understand that they are not the distraction in our busy lives — the cell phone is. If their experience of being with us, even during the time that is our one-on-one time, is that we're chattering away with people who aren't even physically present as we treat our children as if they're invisible, how are they going to get the message?

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Gina Hagler is a writer in Rockville.

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