

Time with family: 'Quality counts more than quantity'

Communicate openly to bond and build trust, experts urge

Priscilla Goy

The Straits Times, 13 September 2014

COUNSELLORS and sociologists say Singaporeans are not spending enough time with their families, echoing the findings of a recent survey on the subject. However, they stressed that it is the quality of the time spent together - and not the quantity - that is vital.

Non-profit group Families for Life quizzed 872 people, mostly parents, and found 47 per cent were dissatisfied with the amount of family time they had. The survey, released last week as part of the Families for Life celebrations, also discovered that four out of 10 have up to six hours of quality family time a week.

Experts told The Straits Times that there is no optimal period that should be spent together. They said that quality time can be achieved through a variety of means but should ultimately make people feel closer to their loved ones.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser added: "It depends on the needs of family members, which are partly related to age. Younger children may need more attention, both in terms of quality and quantity. Teenagers may not need as much 'quantity time'."

Sembawang Family Service Centre executive director Ho Sau Kuen said: "I'd encourage families to communicate openly. It's not just about talking, but people must listen well too."

Such communication "should go beyond just asking functional questions like, 'Have you done your homework?'" , said Ms Agnes Goh, parenting strategist at Focus on the Family Singapore.

However, Mrs Chang-Goh Song Eng, head of Reach Counselling, said speaking less could also be good at times for family members who may prefer having "their own space".

Dr Cecilia Soong, head of the counselling programme at SIM University, agreed about the need to appreciate the needs of loved ones.

"I remember when I was counselling a married couple - the wife hated fishing because she hates the sun, but she would go along with her husband. He, on the other hand, would sleep through a classical concert, but he would still accompany his wife to a performance."

She added: "The quantity of time is important. But I don't think we can stipulate the amount everyone should spend with one's family."

Families hard-pressed to make time in their busy schedules are encouraged to make the most of what little time they have, the experts agreed, with quality family time ultimately resulting in close bonds and the building of trust.

Business manager Anil Mohan, 44, whose parents and two brothers live overseas, keeps in touch with them three times a week via Skype and also calls them almost every day. "For my parents, if they find a long lag between phone calls, they'll be concerned and ask why," he said. "Perhaps older people like the regularity of conversations."

Spending regular quality time with families will be the message at the two-day Families for Life carnival at Singapore Sports Hub, which starts today.

goyshiyi@sph.com.sg