On Your Mind Column

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Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Al is a great guy, great provider, and a great husband. Our resources are such that I get to stay home with the kids. I love it all. However, sometimes I feel drained and taken advantage of. I mean, that seems so selfish since my husband works so hard, 9 to 5, 5 days/week. I’ve already put in a long day’s work when he gets home, and he just kisses me, says “hi” to the kids, and sacks out on the couch waiting for dinner. I’m wrangling my two boys, trying to finish supper, helping them with homework, and then putting them to bed. All the while, Al is yelling at the TV because he doesn’t like the news that’s on. On weekends, he plays golf because “he needs to clear his head.” Clearly, I’m the primary caregiver in our home, and that’s okay with me. But, really, how can I include Al in the parenting routines on weekends and evenings when he’s so tired and sometimes cranky? Signed, Frustrated

Dear Frustrated,

 Okay, so you have probably described the majority of homes in America. If it helps any, you are not alone with your frustrations. Several things. First, you need to have a “come to Jesus” moment with Al, where you lay out for him all that you just shared with me, and more. Just like you did in your letter to me, describe the circumstances vividly and state your feelings. Second, in reality, he has one, 40 hrs/wk job and you have one, 80 hrs/wk job. He will contend that his job is the moneymaker and remind you of all the benefits you accrue from his job. That’s just his being defensive and not wanting to change his ways. Don’t let him sidetrack you.

 Third, active listen his feelings. Too tired, doesn’t know how to do it, out of his comfort zone. When he gets that you understand him, he will be more likely to negotiate and compromise. Fourth, after he gets it and is calmer, go over the weekend and evening routines specifically and thoroughly. Then, ask him where he sees himself pitching in and helping out? Don’t give up your role as primary caregiver, but encourage him to co-parent with you when you are both at home. Sharing the load cuts the work in half. Consider him a “junior partner,” where you oversee his efforts and bring him along in this parenting journey.

 Finally, when you both are on the same page, call a family meeting to let the kids in on the experiment. Write down the weekend and evening routines, so all know exactly what is happening and who’s in charge. As your kids get older, they can do more on their own, but always with parental oversight. Take a week or two to try it all out, tweak the system as you need to, ask for feedback from everybody. Then, put it into effect with a check-in meeting on Sunday afternoons to debrief on how last week went and plan for the coming week.

 I know this all sounds like a lot. Both you and Al will feel more appreciated, working together, and you are presenting a great role model for your kids. Happy parenting ☺

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 What do I do when my child does not seem effected by the punishment? Puzzled

Dear Puzzled,

 Aah, in a power struggle, I see. Of course, you win because you are the parent, physically bigger and stronger. But that’s not the point. Again, relationship always tops power in healthy parenting.

 Our son, Todd, was about 3 years old when his mom swatted him on the bottom to get his attention. “That didn’t hurt,” he said matter-of-factly. Whaaat? She swatted him harder and asked, “How about now?” She demonstrated her power, but at the expense of the relationship. Often, when we sent him to his room, he wouldn’t fuss. He would just go to sleep until his time was up. Not much impact.

 The point of punishment is not to hurt the child. Hopefully it is to make such an impression on him that he gets it and doesn’t do the wrong behavior again. The best way to make that point is to involve your child in the process from the start. Also, remember that “punishment” will only likely have a short-term effect. Go for “natural consequence.” With that goal, your child personalizes the process and, hopefully, sees how his behavior effected his actions. The best natural consequences lead to teachable moments.

 Joey hits his younger sister, Sally. Mom sees it all. “Go to your room, young man, and no electronics for a week.” Joey complies, but learns nothing. This punishment might fit the crime, but at the cost of Joey’s relationship with his parents and with his sister. After all, Sally “caused” Joey to hit her.

 “Go to your room, young man, and think about how we can fix this so it doesn’t happen again. I’ll be in there after I get your sister settled.” When you get back to your son, active listen his protests and rationale for his behavior. When he’s settled enough to be able to hear you, ask how he could have handled the situation differently. Now he has options, rather than impulses. Then tell him, as his “natural consequence”, he needs to write his sister a letter of apology, spend at least 30 minutes a day for the next week hanging out with her to understand what makes her tick, and then talk to you after the week to let you know what he found out. Will it work every time? Probably not, but it’s a step in the right direction. Hang in there.