

Partnership can be challenging at times and it jumps to a whole new level of intensity when you add one or more tiny humans to the mix. Parenting as partners, partnering as parents — however you slice it — takes time, energy, patience and care. And all these things can feel in very short demand between the two of you when you become parents.

So, what can a couple do, in the early years of family life, to keep the relationship cooking and navigate the logistics of getting everything done as they parent growing people who need so much?

Here are 11 ways to strengthen your partnership in the midst of parenting:

1. Accept what is. You two got together under completely different circumstances. And now you are here. So... be here now. Stay present. Meet this moment. Perpetually meet each other as you are now. Not as you were or how you wish each other to be. But right here. Right now. Warts and all.

2. Acknowledge, often and honestly, the wacky phase of life you are in together. The very nature of family life is chaotic when there are children in the home. And the chaos is typically in inverse proportion to the age of the children (younger = more chaos) and direct proportion to the amount (more kids = more chaos). Say it loud and proud, “This is NOT the season of our life where we will have lots of time to nurture each other and our relationship. That time will come again. AND we will do our best with the time we do have together now because this is important to us. All of us.”

3. Invest in the relationship bank account. Make little investments (kind words, simple gestures, warm touches, sweet texts) and big investments (dates when you can, physical and emotional intimacy, time away alone) into the relationship bank account. Be mindful of keeping the account from going into the black.

4. Be honest and own your stuff. When you start to feel resentful because he or she is or isn't doing this or that, check in and notice what's getting triggered. Own that you are tired or overwhelmed or feeling frustrated or feeling inadequate or feeling scared. Take responsibility for how you are feeling instead of putting it on your partner. It's so easy to do the latter, and so much more productive to do the former.

5. Slow down, connect, enjoy. Take more breaths. Look each other in the eyes when you are talking. Hug. Kiss. Give each other “high-fives.” Hold hands when you can. Find things to laugh about. Be silly and playful with each other, especially in the midst of parenting and doing chores and daily life. Make it fun. Make it funny. Find the humor in the absurdity of the fact that you committed to each other. And in being with each other you made babies and in having babies you don't get to actually be with each other all that much!

6. Regulate before you communicate. Try to be aware of where you are in your brain when you communicate. If you are in the red (reptilian brain), don't talk. If you are in the yellow (mammalian brain), do something that gets you back in the green (human brain) before you speak. A few ideas — big breath, drink of water, jump up and down, walk outside, splash your face with water. Remember your partner is hearing your brain state WAY more than he/she is hearing your words. Oh, and no one is a mind reader. Express yourself clearly, from a kind human brain.

7. Check yourself. Be responsible for checking in on your own emotional state. Often. Hold whatever you observe with kindness, not judgment or excuses. Think of it like the way you might talk to a friend who simply needs empathy. Turn to yourself with softness and check in often.

8. Five to one. For every one criticism, give five appreciations. Practice this regardless of if you voice the criticism out loud or you think it to yourself. 5 to 1. Learn it. Live it. Love it.

9. Let it be. Cut everyone around you, especially yourself, a whole lot of slack. Be like Teflon, let the annoyances slide off. Try to let at least 50% of what bunches you up . . . go.

10. Really listen and put yourself in your love's shoes. We all want to feel heard. We all want to feel heard. We all want to feel heard. Give your partner the gift of really listening. And then try to see that person's point of view. Oh and remember, you can be right or you can be connected. But you can't often be both. Go for connection. And finally...

•Choose love.

Please write a comment and let me know which strategy you will try in your partnership (or with yourself)!

If these concepts strike a cord with you, I'd love for you to visit my website www.carriecontey.com for more tips and tools to make family life everything you dream it can be.