Attention is the Currency of Relationships

Dollars run the economy. Attention runs your family.

We live in an attention economy. The biggest, most powerful companies in the world are what they are because they control so much of our attention. They want as much of our attention as they can get - and that of our kids.

Today I'm asking... do you want your kids' attention as much as *Meta* wants it?

I struggle with this. I travel, run a busy business, have emails and flights and webinars and devices pinging. Plus with six children (and a granddaughter), it's safe to say that both Mrs Happy Families and I are pulled in a lot of directions. Oh... and it's also really nice to veg out now and then and pretend there's nothing to do. Just take a break, ignore the world, and get lost in some YouTube shorts, right?

I wrote some years ago that just as dollars are the currency of our economy, attention is the currency of our relationships. The line has stuck with people, and I think it is because it names something we already feel. We know when we are being paid attention to, and we know when we are not.

Children know it too. They know it with devastating accuracy.

We asked our children if they felt we really listened to them when they spoke with us. Speaking to my wife, Ella (aged 8), said, "You say you're listening but you're not. Like if you're doing craft or art, or if Dad's on the computer, you're not emotionally available to us."

That's a direct quote.

So if attention is the currency of our relationships, are you in the red (in debt) or in the black (in profit)? Here are some useful strategies for getting the emotional and attentional bank account where it needs to be, and how to spend that attention currency more deliberately.

1. Notice where it is going

For one day, pay attention to your attention. Who got it, when, and for how long? Most parents are startled by the answer, and the startle is the useful part.

2. Give it when things are good

If the only time your children get your full focus is when something has gone wrong, you have taught them exactly how to get it - and they'll do whatever they have to in order to get more. A friend used to call it "soggy chips" syndrome. No one wants soggy chips, but if that's all that's on offer, they're better than nothing. Find your children when nothing is happening and give them a few minutes for no reason at all.

3. Make the deposits small and frequent

A weekend away is lovely... and it will not do the work. A big holiday is a massive treat... and it won't make the lasting shift you need. What builds the account is twenty seconds in a hallway, a question asked properly at the kitchen bench, a touch on a shoulder or elbow as you walk past. Small, often, and without an agenda.

4. Put the phone in another room

This one matters so, so much. Don't put it face down. And not on silent either. That doesn't cut it. In another room. Research is consistent that the mere presence of a phone reduces the quality of a conversation, and your children can tell the difference between your eyes on them and your eyes on a screen.

5. Check who is getting the least

In most families there is a child who is easy, and that child is often shortchanged. Work out who in your house is quietly receiving the smallest share, and go and find them this week.

There are times when you're tired. Or your child withdraws. There's stress, commitments, overwhelm, overstimulation, and sheer exhaustion.

But putting some currency into the attention bank account - a genuine investment of attention in the relationships - pays off every day. To a child, love is spelled T-I-M-E. Spend the time, and watch the relationship mature over the years.



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