

How parents spend time with children in urban Sri Lanka.

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Sri Lanka has a labor force participation rate of 54% (2013, Labour Force Survey, Sri Lanka). Out of the economically active population, 65% is male and 35% female (2013, Labour Force Survey, Sri Lanka). With the economic situation and lifestyle changes, in most families both the mother and father are employed in the urban areas of the country. This article concentrates on families in the urban areas of Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, as young couples have children, it is common for the grandparents to care for the young children, as child support systems such as day-care facilities are yet to become popularized. The parents work minimum five days a week, typically from 8am to 5pm. Due to the heavy traffic situation in the country, people leave their homes early morning and return late in the evening. Therefore, the time they have to spend with their children is very limited.

It has been observed that in most cases, parents tend to shower their children with toys and give in to the demands of the children. These may be interpreted as 'guilt gifts'... gifts that compensate for not spending quality time with the children. The children grow up with the grandparents and nannies at home and get accustomed to their habits, nuances and even language. A friend of mine who is a Sinhalese has a Tamil nanny at home; she was commenting that her three-year old speaks Tamil fluently and not Sinhalese, which is supposed to be his mother-tongue, as Tamil is the language that the nanny uses to talk to the child.



Child with Grandmother

In the present environment, the parents need to make an extra effort to communicate with the children in order to build a healthy relationship. Some parents have jobs that require them to travel within the country as well as overseas. This creates an added strain on the relationship between the parent and child. Most parents do not realize the negative impact of their absence in their children's lives when the children are small, but as they grow to become teenagers and the parents lose control, the parents start realizing that they have lost the hold on their children.

Communication with the children is limited to phone calls mostly as the parents do

not have the time to talk to the children during the day. I have faced many situations where my colleagues receive phone calls from their children whilst they are busy at work and inadvertently the parent cuts the conversation short and ends the call. What is important is that the parents at least phones the child back, which most often does not happen as parents often think that they can sort out whatever the problem is when they reach home in the evening. The situation gets worse when parents carry work home and is 'disturbed' by children when they try to work at home.

However, parents do try to make time for the children's various school activities, from parent-teacher meetings, sports days, dramas, exhibitions, etc. In some cases, the parents take turns to be at these events. It is a constant struggle of juggling work and life for the parent.

Also, parents try to make up for lost time during the weekends. They attend to all household chores whilst engaging with the children. In addition, parents ensure that children follow various activities such as music, swimming, badminton, and such programs too may fall during the weekend. At the end of the weekend, parents are drained of energy and head to work on Monday feeling exhausted. It is very common to hear, especially females, commenting that weekends are more hectic than the entire week of work in office.

Raising children and having healthy relationships with them is an ever demanding task. What is important is that parents understand the importance of communicating with their children and forming strong relationships of understanding and caring. It would certainly be advisable for parents to consciously make room in their daily agendas to spend some quality time with their children. This will ensure the formation of healthy, happy relationships between parents and children and the positive ripple effects to the society at large.