

CONSIDER THIS

Is multitasking good for her?

By Annie Fox

Lots of us think that we're more efficient when we do more than one thing at a time. And women are presumed to be born multitaskers. Personally, I don't find it a superior skill. When I multitask, I actually take more time to complete what I'm doing, and I'm more likely to make a mistake. When you also factor in the inevitable stress and the emotional detachment resulting from being so "scattered," well, it doesn't make a great case in favor of multitasking.

Yet many women—and men—multitask, and our daughters certainly get the message that it's a great thing. As an advice columnist, I get emails from girls talking about the pressures to get a million things done, and done well, and how it makes them crazy and cranky. Yet it's so hard for them to slow down and reclaim some breathing space.

I also get a lot of emails from girls and boys spelling out their frustration about trying to talk to their parents about things that matter. Teens say their parents "don't listen." Parents tell me the same thing about their teens. We all want to improve parent-teen communication. But we can't do our part when we're busy with six other things or even one other thing.

I know it's not always possible to drop what you're doing to listen to your daughter. But let's be honest: not many of us do open-heart surgery or negotiate international crises at home. So when our kids want to talk, we could take a break and focus on them if we chose to. But most of the time we don't. We keep doing whatever we're doing and shift into an unconscious auto-listening/responding thing: "Uh-huh. Uh-huh." If you feel like it's more pressing to fold laundry or

do your online banking instead of having a real conversation with your child, that's your choice, but at least be upfront about it.

Auto-listening isn't healthy. In a healthy relationship trust and respect have to flow in both directions. Want your daughter to respect you? Then you've got to respect her. Auto-listening is disrespectful. And it's not fooling her anyway. Even toddlers have been known to turn Mom or Dad's head to get their attention. If she knew at 18 months old that no eye contact means you're preoccupied, how can you hope to fake it with her now? And why would you want to?

Auto-listening is poor modeling. Our daughters don't always listen to us, of course, and sometimes that's because developmentally, they want to shut us out to build their own identity. You can't do much about their developmental needs, but when you make a real effort to listen to your kids (with eye contact, 100% of your attention, and an open heart and mind), you're setting the stage for them to listen more attentively to you and to others who will someday be at the center of their emotional lives.

If your daughter is troubled enough to come to you, this is

when you need to be a great parent. If you're truly involved in something that can't be interrupted, even for 5 minutes, then at least stop momentarily, make eye contact, and say, "Sweetheart, I really want to hear this, and you deserve one hundred percent of my attention, but I can't give you that right now. Can this wait until 8 o'clock?" (You can't use this excuse very often—otherwise she's going to think, "You never have time for me.")

When 8 o'clock arrives, don't forget your promise. And don't make her have to initiate the conversation again. Now it's up to you to be the leader, go knock on her door, and ask, "Want to talk now?" The intensity of the emotion that initially brought your daughter to you initially may have passed, and you may have missed an opportunity to help. But by coming around as you said you would, you're showing your daughter that you really do care. And chances are, she'll give you other opportunities to focus on her. □

Annie Fox has written The Teen Survival Guide to Dating and Relating and Too Stressed to Think? (co-written with Ruth Kirschner, Free Spirit, 2005).

