

Family Nights

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by Carolyn Mahaney

From the time our children were very young we have had a weekly "family night." This is an evening we set aside each week where we eat a special dinner together and do a fun activity. The purpose is to build family closeness and create special memories. Now some 25 years later, we have a whole collection of memories that we review often with fondness and laughter.

I must tell you, though, that some of our laughter comes from remembering family nights that went awry. We had times when our fun activity became a "resolving conflict activity" or times when the fun activity turned out to be not so fun after all! Like the time I planned for everyone to paint those little plaster houses to display under our Christmas tree. I had picked up this great idea from another mom, only I neglected to consider the fact that her family is very talented when it comes to doing crafts while my family is not. Our painting project did not go well. By the end of the evening, we had not succeeded in producing pretty painted Christmas houses; sinful attitudes were being displayed instead. Given how dreadful the houses looked, we eventually threw them away.

Though we weren't laughing on this particular family night, we have certainly laughed about it many times since. This goes to show that even when a family night doesn't go as planned it can still be a fun memory someday. And we want to provide our families with a whole lot of fun memories! That's why family nights are well worth the time and effort it takes to make them happen.

As Tedd Tripp points out:

"The most powerful way to keep your child from being attracted by the offers of camaraderie with the wicked is to make home an attractive place to be. Young people do not run from places where they are loved and know unconditional acceptance. They do not run away from homes where there are solid relationships. They do not run from homes in which the family is planning activities and doing exciting things."

Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Pa.: Shepherd Press, 1995), 195.

Now I am always on the lookout for creative ideas for family nights, and I'm sure many of you are as well. So we thought we would post some of our favorites over the next several days, and we'd also like to hear about yours. If you have a fun family activity you'd like to share with everyone, please email us by clicking on the "Email me" link on the left sidebar. We will post some of the best ideas next week. We look forward to hearing from you!

Nicole's Picks

by Nicole Whitacre

My sisters and I always looked forward to family night with childlike eagerness.

My all-time favorite was "Mahaney Family Olympics." When the 1984 Olympics took place, I was eight and Kristin was seven. We were captured by the sheer excitement of it all. I think that's why this particular family night is so vivid in my memory.

In our flannel nightgowns we ran races around the dining room table. We threw ping pong balls into a bowl of water. And we had a relay race with toothpicks and lifesavers. (You had to put the toothpick in your mouth, put the lifesaver on the toothpick and then transfer it to your partner--no hands). The climactic moment came when Dad would line us up in the foyer and hum the national anthem while awarding us our "medals." I can't imagine the athletes felt more happiness than we did.

Another favorite family night was the time we switched places at the dinner table. My mom had us draw the name of another family member and we had to sit in their seat at dinner and behave like them throughout the meal. I remember it being so funny to see my dad imitating my Uncle Grant (who lived with us at the time) and my mom acting silly like Janelle.

We repeated this family night again about fifteen years later along with the two pastors' college students who lived in our basement. It was even more hysterical the second time, and enlightening too, to see everyone's idiosyncracies acted out by another member of the family.

Finally, "Backwards Night" was inspired by the definitions of the word "backwards": "doing something in the reverse of the usual, the right way," and "toward the past." We, of course, did everything backwards for that

particular family night. We had breakfast for dinner. And we had to have fulfilled a "backward assignment" during the day and tell about it at dinner. The options were to wear an article of clothing backwards (one that people could see!), eat our lunch backwards in the presence of a friend, walk backwards around the outside of the house three times (while it was still daytime!), or wear a nametag all day with our name written backwards. Then, at dinner, after we reported on our humiliating "backward assignment," we looked backwards over the past year and recounted one specific example of God's goodness.

These and countless other family nights formed a childhood rich in laughter and fun. I am so grateful for the time and effort my parents invested in these rich memories for my sisters and me. And I hope Steve and I can provide Jack with many funny, happy memories too.

Kristin's Picks

by Kristin Chesemore

My favorite family night didn't start out so well. In fact, Dad and Mom sent Nicole and me to bed. We were six and seven at the time, so you can imagine that we weren't too happy to see that two-year old Janelle was allowed to stay up, and was actually playing! She was smugly pushing her toy shopping cart up and down the hallway in front of our room—no doubt attempting to rub it in.

But after a few minutes, Dad and Mom came back to our room and announced we were going somewhere in the car. But they told us NOT to change out of our flannel onesies. We were going on a PAJAMA RIDE! Talk about excitement! I felt a little strange walking into Dunkin Donuts in yellow pajamas, but the glazed donut cured all my embarrassment.

I think what makes this particular memory still so vivid twenty years later is the element of surprise. Dad and Mom weren't just out to build special memories, but they created a little culture of anticipation amongst my sisters and me! We never knew what they were going to plan next!

Dad and Mom were also very intentional about building a culture of encouragement. One family night in particular was built around a theme of encouragement. At dinner, we took turns encouraging each member of the family. Then we made sugar cookies using alphabet cookie cutters. We had to spell out a word that described a character quality of one particular family member we had been assigned to encourage. Then, we had to honor that person sometime over the next week.

My final family night memory is more recent. In fact, I was courting Brian at the time, so he participated in this one. It was "Mystery Night." The suspense began with dinner. Each family member had been assigned a particular aspect of the meal (appetizer, main course, side dish, dessert, etc.) the week before. We could decide what we would make, but we had to keep our dish a secret. So, when we showed up for dinner, we had a surprise of a meal—including peanut butter sandwiches, fancy salad, green bean casserole, shrimp cocktail, and kool-aid. To set the mood we had mystery music in the background. The game for that evening was an invigorating round of Clue. We finished off with a frightening Alfred Hitchcock flick.

Maybe Brian and I will have mystery night with our boys someday. What fun activities has your family enjoyed? Please send us your ideas!

Janelle's Picks

by Janelle Bradshaw

Just mention the phrase "Family Night" and tons of wonderful memories flood my mind. No fair having to pick favorites, but these three come pretty close...

"Progressive Dinner"- This one works great for the little guys. We ate each part of our dinner in a different room while doing an activity. In the first room we ate hot dogs and put a puzzle together. The Memory Game and deviled eggs came with the second room. Apple sauce and story in the third room. We concluded with apple cider and talked about the meaning of each of our names in the last room (to my sisters' delight that is when I discovered that my name means "gift from God").

"Fall Fun Night"- This evening consisted of a fall theme relay. The first person to complete the following activities--unscramble fall related words, drink a cup of hot cider, bob for apples, find two hidden gourds outside, and eat a bowl of caramel popcorn--won a prize. Just my kind of relay with plenty of food involved. I can't remember who won, but it was probably me.

"Silly Night"- On this evening we had to come dressed "silly" for dinner. I can remember running around my house that afternoon trying to put together all of the craziest stuff that I could find. This was right down my alley (probably not one of Kristin's favorites). We all assembled for dinner

looking ridiculous--mismatched outfits and crazy hair. Next we had to eat our meal backwards. This meant starting with dessert (a practice I still enjoy) and ending with our salad. The backwards meal was made more hilarious when mom had us use the wrong utensils for eating our food. This led into a series of silly activities. We drew a picture in the dark. Mom turned out the lights and gave instructions. "Draw the outline of a house. Put a door on the house. Put a tree in the yard..." You get the idea. Not exactly art museum material. Next we all had to draw names and give a silly command to the name that we drew and the evening ended with a lovely family picture. This is a "must do" family night! In fact I might see if the fam is up for resurrecting this one.

I am so grateful for the hours my mom spent making family nights so unique and fun. I can't wait to do these same activities with my children. I trust that each of you have enjoyed these ideas and that ideas have been sparked in your own minds for your families. Have fun!

A Matter of Minutes

by Carolyn Mahaney

Maybe it was reflecting back on family nights last week. Or possibly it was attending my nephew's wedding this past Saturday. But for whatever reason, I have been thinking a lot about the brevity of life.

It seems only a short time ago that CJ and I were sitting on the floor playing Memory Game with our 3 girlies. It feels as if it was just yesterday when I caught Marcus (my nephew) hoisting up his co-conspirator cousin (my daughter Janelle) to fetch the forbidden candy on the top shelf of the cabinet.

Yet each of my daughters and now Marcus are married. As one author fittingly stated: It's only a snap of the finger from diapers to tuxedos and wedding gowns.

In Holy Scripture we find David and Job comparing the span of our lives to a breath (Ps. 144:4; Job 7:7). A breath takes only a second or two! At least Moses gave us a little more time when he likened the length of our days to grass that lasts from morning to evening (Ps. 90:5,6). Even still—a half day is not very long!

Now if our lifespan is comparable to about 12 hours that means the seasons of our lives are only minutes long. Think about that. Whether you are a

teenager, a single adult, a new bride, a mom with preschool children, an empty nester, or whatever your season—you have only a few minutes left before this season ends.

The problem is that sometimes we get so bogged down with daily life that we forget life is passing quickly. In fact many of us function as if our present season is going to last forever.

John Calvin has a word for us in this regard. He said:

“Whence proceeds the great stupidity of men, who, bound fast to the present state of existence, proceed in the affairs of life as if they were to live two thousand years.... In short, men are so dull as to think that thirty years, or even a smaller number, are, as it were, an eternity; nor are they impressed with the brevity of their life so long as this world keeps possession of their thoughts.... How speedily our life vanishes away. The imagination that we shall have long life, resembles a profound sleep in which we are all benumbed.”

John Calvin, *Heart Aflame*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 219.

Let's “wake up” to the fact that we have only a short time left in our present season. More importantly, let's live as if we have just a few minutes remaining.

Family Night Finalists

by Carolyn Mahaney

Thanks so much to those of you who sent in ideas for memorable family activities. Here are a few of our favorites:

"Sometimes for our family night dinner, I have the kids design the center piece. It is usually made of lego spaceships, k-nex robots, lincoln log cabin, art work, playdough sculpture, etc. They LOVE this. Each child (3 boys, 1 girl) takes turns explaining his or her contribution to the center piece. (Another benefit is that it keeps them occupied while I cook.)" --*Laurie Reyes*

"One of my favorite family activities has always been birthdays. From the time we were very young, my mom was very intentional about how we celebrated birthdays. She wanted it to be a day where we celebrated the life of the birthday boy/girl and showed them how

much they were loved and cared for. So on our birthday we were allowed to choose the menu for the entire day; a cake decorated however we wanted; and an activity for the whole family such as putt-putt, games, swimming, sightseeing, bowling, etc. As homeschoolers, we even got the day off school! Birthdays were set aside as holidays and were something the entire family was excited about. Looking back, my mom put a lot of time and effort into making it special; but those days are some of our most treasured memories. Now even though some of us are adults with jobs or children, we still make every effort to keep each birthday completely open on our schedule so that we can keep up the tradition!"

--*Alyssa Sieb*

"My special memory was a one-time event. We were traveling from Iowa to Denver, Colorado for a family vacation. Just as us kids were starting to get bored in the car, Mom pulled out a fancy book with blank pages. She had put it in her purse just for this purpose! She wanted each of us to write or draw pictures about the trip, as we were traveling. We each took our turn at that time. Then we would take the book again, as the mood would strike, throughout the trip. By the end of the week, the book was filled with stories and pictures and 'inside jokes' that everyone knew about. That special book made such an impression on me, because Mom had planned it as a special secret to keep until just the right time. It was a treat that lasted the whole week and beyond. It may have not been the most exciting thing we did on that vacation, but it turned out to be the most memorable." --*Dawn Brincks**

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