

## Building Strong Families

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Back in the early 1990s, I was living in Hong Kong with my wife, Kate and two young children. Because I had little time at home during the week, Saturday morning was often set aside for me to give Kate a break and to give the children some time with dad. So the children and I were despatched to a local beach armed with buckets and spades, sun cream and cold drinks. Before I left, I would usually slip a copy of *The Economist* magazine into my bag. As she kissed me goodbye, Kate would slip it out again and instruct me to play with the children and not to read my magazine.

As a parent, I knew I didn't want to be like my dad. After he divorced my mother when I was three, he was never around. I wanted to be around for my children. The problem was that I had no idea how to play with them – hence the magazine on the beach. Also, having spent most of my childhood at boarding school, my experience was that parenting was something that happened only during school holidays.

For those who see parenting as natural and obvious, my shortcomings probably sound ridiculous. But old habits die hard. Although I am around a lot now, my children would tell you that I still don't play with them much, except of course during school holidays. Despite my inadequacies, three ideas have been very dominant in building strong family bonds.

### Family rituals

The first idea is the importance of ritual. Around the time of our beach/magazine saga, Kate and I went to a talk on parenting given by the American preacher, Tony Campolo. I was expecting some handy hints and tips but instead picked up three fabulous parenting principles. He talked about the importance of giving children a sense of direction, applying unconditional love, and building ritual into family life. Since then ritual has become an integral part of Benson family life.

### Making memories

The second idea is to create special memories for each child. One of the ways we try to devote special time to each child is by giving them a week's holiday on their own with mum and dad in the year before and after their teenage years. So when they are 13 and 18 we intend them to have a special holiday of their choice – money permitting. Not all memories need be a great deal of money.