

Parents, Don't Blame Kids For Diminished Sex Lives

Four-month-old Scotty is red-faced and screaming. His raging ear infection has him (and his mom, Betsy) awake for a second night. The pediatrician says the antibiotics

should kick in by tomorrow — but relief can't come soon enough. Betsy rocks Scotty in her arms until he finally falls into a deep rhythmic sleep.



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING
INTIMACY, SEX
& RELATIONSHIPS

"Thank heavens," she whispers to herself, and gently places him in his crib.

Today has been a day for the books — chasing her 3-year-old Melissa and her two friends (it was Betsy's turn to host the play-date), scraping crayon marks and chocolate pudding from the kitchen walls, and trying to keep Stephanie, their 14-month-old, from proudly displaying her bare bottom as she scoots around the house (she just learned to remove her own diaper). The last thing on the agenda is reading "Goodnight Moon" to Melissa (at least twice) before she can finally get some rest.

Austen has been working his typically late hours for the past two

weeks and hardly hears the commotion — propped up in bed and immersed in his spread sheet. There are rumors of layoffs and he's not going to give the company a reason to let him go.

As Betsy slides between the sheets, Austen closes his laptop and rolls toward her in a way that means he'd like sex. Her stomach does a flip. The last thing she wants right now is anyone's hands on her — not even ones without sticky Popsicle residue. She has nothing more to give. She hopes he'll understand, but Austen is annoyed.

"How long will this go on?" he mutters.

"Until the kids have graduated college," she thinks to herself and silently turns out the light.

"Tomorrow I'll be more rested," she hopes, resigning herself to obligatory sex, and she'll count the minutes until it's over.

Many couples complain that sex ends when the kids arrive. The love canal transforms into the birth canal.

When couples come to me seeking solutions for post-baby blahs I used to suggest the usual remedies — locks on bedroom doors, romantic escapes or scheduling date nights — usually to no avail. I'd hear, "Yes,

but, it's not easy to find a baby sitter . . ." or "I know you're right . . . but (blah, blah, blah)." It dawned on me that these smart folks already had all of these answers, so why weren't they using them? They're probably not having good sex now, because they didn't have it before the kids were born. They need the basic skills.

Sexuality involves putting yourself on the line — naked and vulnerable. It isn't as easy as it sounds. Sure it can feel good (if things go well) but there can be a lot of obstacles to overcome until you get to the fun part. Most of us have to face unrealistic expectations, imperfect bodies and lackluster performance.

Everyone knows that the easy, temporary thrills of early infatuation don't take any talent. But mature sex with a committed partner involves planning, openness and work that get more challenging as the years roll on.

So when you tell yourself you're not having sex because of the kids, be careful not to believe your own hype. This could be a convenient excuse. Ask yourself how you've connected love to physical affection in your relationship and how high (or low) you've placed sexuality

among your values.

I'm not denying that mounting exhaustion and pressures of parenthood can exact a price on sexuality. But let's admit that we each define the kind of mother (or father) we will be and then complain we are overextended, exhausted and underappreciated.

I can hear you protest, "Well, someone has to do it." Do what? Exactly who made the decisions that little Sara has to go to gymnastics, piano lessons and soccer practice three times a week? Or that you have to teach your 17-month-old to read? There has to be a limit — for them and for us.

Life is about choices. This is a big candy store and we can't have it all. Love is the centerpiece as we're putting together this jigsaw puzzle of life.

"Good mothers" are often associated with words like "self-sacrificing," "well organized" and "putting the needs of others before their own." Good lovers are experts at nurturing themselves, immersing themselves in pleasure and spontaneously seizing the moment. Reconciling the two is the challenge, but it can be done.

Does motherhood have to conflict with passion? Absolutely not.

Couples who promise that sex will be OK once the kids are sleeping through the night, in high school, or in college are only kidding themselves. After the kids are gone, they are likely to find themselves just as alone and sexless.

Instead of complaining that you don't make love because you've gained a few pounds, shifted hormones, or haven't finished your never-ending to-do-lists, face the facts. We change over time. As Eckert Tolle says — experience the power of now.

Sex isn't one more thing we give to others. It also replenishes and restores our own vitality. Celebrate the joys of sensuality along with the joys of motherhood. Wishing you a Happy Mother's Day!

Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist in Farmington. You may e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com; her website is www.drscandy.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual individuals.