



License to Breathe

Parents recharge their batteries with a hall pass

By Stephanie Riley

My husband has a hall pass for the next three days. What, you ask, is a hall pass? Let me explain. Like the high school ticket that allows the bearer to roam about somewhat freely, in our home a hall pass means that one parent or the other is out and about, moving freely.

Those without children will now scratch their heads in confusion as they ponder the inability to move about freely. It's not as if we have a parking boot attached to our legs, but there are certainly things that one is unable to do when accompanied by children (particularly the under-10 set).

As a person who has been married one-third of my life, I can honestly say that the availability of hall passes is one thing that makes our relationship work. And that should be a primary concern for all parents—after all, we don't want to be doing this job alone, do we?

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Wishful thinking for the author's next relaxing getaway

Some friends I know have turned to their churches to work on their relationships. Others have taken up a hobby together, such as playing golf or running. One friend even took the lead in an innovative program called "Ten Great Dates," which engineered some fun activities for couples to do together to grow closer and put the fun back into their relationships. All of these things are great ideas, but in our house, taking time *together* is just *part* of the equation. Time apart (sometimes alone) also helps us maintain balance in our lives. Remember balance? It's that nifty concept that lets us adapt when daily life tosses us a curveball, which you can pretty much count on in today's world.

Looking back to when we were newlyweds, we each had hobbies and pursuits that made us interesting to each other. It seems only logical that we maintain at least some of

those interests to continue to grow as individuals, which can only add to our relationship. If I take away my husband's interest in nature sports, running and tinkering with his power tools, I might wake up one day and find my relationship to be kind of dull. And likewise, with a bit of time to pursue my hobbies, I hope to avoid becoming a tiresome partner as well. By taking that time to be individuals, I find we become better partners and even better parents. Enter the hall pass.

When our first child was born, she had a bright young pediatrician who made a point to ask us if we were taking time for ourselves. At the time, I wondered if we were showing signs of a strained relationship during those periodic well-baby checkups. Now, with a few years of parenting under my belt, I can see that this doc was just looking out for our family as a

whole. Resentful, pent-up parents who feel trapped by diapers, late-night feedings and the frustration of caring for a newborn without an occasional break are not likely to make a happy home for their kids. Simply put, if we're happy, they're happy.

All of this explanation is not to say that having my hubby gone for three days (and three long nights) is a walk in the park—it's not. Having the sole responsibility for our children 24/7 can be pretty tough on all of us (except for the one who's enjoying the hall pass, naturally).

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The kids don't have another parent to lobby for that second ice cream bar, I don't have someone around to commiserate with when the cat knocks the cat food bag down the basement stairs, and shuttling everyone to bed can be chaotic at best. There are those moments when screaming, "Calgon, take me away," sounds like a pretty good option. (My dear husband admits that even going to work sounds like a break when I'm out of town.)

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During these hall passes, when I start to feel a bit resentful of the fun my hubby's having while I'm doing the dirty work, I just remind myself that my turn will come. That knowledge and a sense of humor are enough to make the solo effort bearable. I am reminded during these hall passes that our kids don't expect perfection. (Mine wouldn't recognize it if it was presented to them on a silver platter.)

I remind myself that household rules are simply a framework for our expectations, and there are times when the rules go out the window. Bedtime? Eventually, the kids will pass out from exhaustion and I can carry them to their beds. Dinner? The kids don't mind if we eat mac-'n'-cheese again. Housework? There is no pressure to have the house picked up by 6 p.m. when dad walks through the door. Companionship? I can watch "Grey's Anatomy" or chat with my night-owl girlfriends when all the kids are safely in bed. If all else fails, I can daydream about how I'll spend my next hall pass.

When my husband comes home, we will be happy to see him come through the door. Likewise, when I take off for a spa in Scottsdale or a girls' weekend in Vegas, I'll know that it's a well-deserved, guilt-free break.

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