

On Parenting • Perspective

## I had a child and cut back on my social life. Here's why.



(iStock)

By **Bridget Shirvell**

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### CORRECTION

An earlier version of this story mistakenly said Denaye Barahona has three children. She has two. The story has been updated.

My daughter is giddy, clapping her hands as she hurriedly toddles toward her aunt. We're having a quiet weekend at home and my sister has popped by, as she often does, simply to hang out. Later we might all go to the park or to lunch at the Thai restaurant around the corner. Or maybe we won't stray far from the living room floor, where toys and books are strewn about.

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As the mother of a curious and active toddler, there are many days when I can't count the number of times I utter the word no. I say no when my daughter flashes me a smile while reaching for the dog's water bowl, and I say no when she starts to climb the bookshelf

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calendar, and it's created the time and space for me to focus on maintaining close relationships while allowing my daughter to form her own strong bonds.

Asked what our weekend plans are, most often my husband and I will say not much, or that we plan to spend time at home. "Sorry, I can't make it" is more often than not our response to invitations from colleagues, friends and family for after-work drinks, brunches or birthday parties. We're in the thick of parenthood, and what started as an organic way to survive the newborn stage has evolved into a conscious decision to apply a minimalist philosophy to our social life.

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From wardrobes to tiny homes, minimalism has been popping up everywhere over the past few years. But while minimalism is all the rage in decorating and consumer culture, we often don't think about it in terms of another cluttered aspect of our modern lives: the social calendar.

"I started with my closet," says Denaye Barahona, a mom of two who runs the blog and podcast [Simple Families](#), about getting interested in minimalism while she was pregnant with her second child. "Once I got through our home, I still felt overwhelmed, even though the clutter was gone. I started to think about mental clutter and began scaling back on our calendar.

Whether it's social media pressure and Fear of Missing Out, or simply the juggling of the many doctor appointments, play dates and other activities that are required to maintain our lives, it's easy to pack every last minute with activities. When I was pregnant, the only thought I really gave to how having a child would affect my social life was that getting out of the house would be harder and require more planning. I didn't expect to find myself craving the spontaneity having an open calendar allows.

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When our daughter was born, we didn't share the news — outside of our families, a few close friends and our employers — for more than a week. We brought her home and said no to visitors at first, spending a quiet week, just the three of us and our golden retriever. Those first days allowed us the chance to bond and adjust to our new family without pressure, and without other things stealing our attention. That set the tone for the low-key parenting style we've maintained. Before long, I was saying no to more activities and consequently more people, intentionally focusing on the relationships that mattered the most to me.

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“Minimalism focuses on the ‘why’ of the relationship. It brings attention to the intention of the relationship,” says Ashley S. Lingerfelt, a licensed associate professional counselor in Georgia.

Lingerfelt says the modern take on the “it takes a village to raise a child” mentality is skewed and that there are significant benefits to be found — especially for new parents — in focusing on the quality, rather than the quantity, of relationships.

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“New parents need someone in their village who will come and sit with them without giving unwanted advice or needing anything in return,” Lingerfelt says. “In every case, the quality of the relationship trumps the quantity of items thrown at the relationship in an effort to appear helpful.

For Oregon mom Miranda Rake, cutting down on her social calendar happened organically as she focused on adjusting her family’s schedule around her son’s.

“When my son was a newborn I realized pretty quickly that everyone we knew fell into two categories: people who understood that I prioritized my son’s sleep schedule above everything else (because doing so meant that we all got the rest we needed) and people who thought I was insane to do so,” Rake says in a Facebook message exchange. “The people who didn’t get it slowly fell away, but that left room for fewer, more meaningful (and easier!) friendships.

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Now that her son is 2, Rake says she’s noticed how happy she is when her family doesn’t have set plans.

“I haven’t intentionally thought ‘I’m going to cut so-and-so out of my life,’ but I have intentionally de-prioritized social stuff with other adults. A quieter social life allows for a more open schedule, which allows for the freedom we need to take the days as they come,” Rake says.

Barahona, who was more intentional about cutting down her social schedule, says that while her family’s social network has become smaller, it’s also become more intimate.

“Having less on our calendar makes us happier, and by doing less we have the physical and mental bandwidth to have more meaningful relationships with the family and friends that we want to spend time with,” Barahona says.

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The concept of time shifts when you become a parent, especially during the newborn stage. Time is still there, but it’s allotted differently. For my husband and me, being social minimalists during the newborn stage happened without any real intention, but as our child gets older it will require more discipline to maintain that philosophy. But it’s something that we’re determined to do, as we’ve realized that doing less not only cuts down on our stress and gives us more energy, it’s also given us the ability to foster deeper relationships.

“Applying a minimalist philosophy to relationships means focusing on experiences more than anything else,” Lingerfelt says. “These do not have to be grand experiences. These experiences can be as simple as enjoying a walk together, going to a museum together, eating together and more.

Still, it can be hard to say no, especially when you don’t have plans. Barahona says she tries to be honest with people and will say, “We’re just going to have a quiet day at home.” “I take ownership of it,” she says. “I’m usually pretty honest about it and I found people really respect the truth.

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Fifteen months into opting out, we’re finding that this approach works for us. As my daughter gets older, I know I will cherish these quiet weekends at home watching her with her aunt, the coffee dates with my best friend, or even grander experiences like flying across the country so she can stick her toes in the Pacific Ocean with her uncle. These things are forming my daughter’s childhood memories, but they’re also helping her learn to build effective relationships.

And for us, that’s more valuable than a jam-packed schedule of structured activities.

*Bridget Shirvell is a writer living with her family in the Bronx. Her work has appeared on Civil Eats, Martha Stewart, PBS NewsHour and more. Find her online at [breeshirvell.com](http://breeshirvell.com).*

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