

Proactive Parenting: April 2016

The Gifts of Time and Freedom

Raise your hand if you often feel overwhelmed with the schedule you keep and long for more time to just "be". Imagine how our children, with their often jam packed schedules must feel. There is increasing concern about overscheduled children of all ages, and the consequent rise in stress and anxiety issues, as well as the loss of meaningful family time. Finding the time to be together for one meal a week can be hard to pull off once soccer, baseball, etc. start in the spring. There is a sense of being swept up by forces beyond our control and parents worry about their children missing out or falling behind on all the activities for which so many neighbors and friends have signed up their children. And as children approach middle school and high school, it's hard not to worry about your child 'building their resume' in our highly competitive world. But at some point don't we, as parents, need to start asking, is this good for my child? How much is too much?

So what are parents to do? We can't turn the clock to a time when kids spent summers and weekends outside in generally unstructured, adult free activities, entertaining themselves for hours on end until it was time to come in and do chores, or eat. Fast forward to a time when even many three year olds have busy schedules, generally spend too much time in front of screens, and when too many parents feel they need to keep their children entertained all the time. Precious little time is engaged in what is called 'free play'. Play that is created by the child, that is about the process and the journey, play that may need only the child's imagination and a big box, a ball, or woods to explore. What scholars in child development and psychology are realizing is that essential growth happens when kids regularly connect with their families and engage with other children (siblings, neighbors, friends) in play that is not structured and/or directed by adults, toy companies, video games, television, or computers.

Dr. David Elkind, Professor Emeritus of Child Studies at Tufts, writes about the disappearance of childhood and it's movement indoors. In his book: "The Power of Play" he shares his deep concern about the lack of free play and the connection between this and the fabric of childhood socialization. He suggests that in generations past, children from place to place all around the country shared similar games, songs, chants, etc. Together they developed a common thread between them, a sort of feeling that they all belonged to the same group. "Without the opportunity for extended periods of free play on a regular basis, children lose this sense of belonging and common "language", and also the skills needed to problem solve amongst themselves. It socialized them in a way that taught them how to cooperate, make and break their own rules, and eventually create mutual rules that lead to mutual respect. It wasn't always pretty or easy, but they truly learned it by doing it themselves. It is critically important that children have unstructured time, i.e. without adults deciding all the rules and managing the play, for children to develop these critical skills in their own way and in their own time. Without them,

and a sense of belonging and mutual trust, it is much easier to ostracize and bully peers."

So what's unstructured play look like? Imagine children with jars trying to catch fireflies, or spending hours climbing trees, or making 'clubhouses' under them. Imagine kids on a rainy day taking a few umbrellas and making a fort to play under. Imagine kids in a "pick-up" game of football, where one child is not much of an athlete, and over time figures out the group could use a decent football to play with, so if he brings the ball, he gets to play. Eventually he gets better. Or imagine a bunch of children waiting in the family car, back when that was done. With only their imaginations and ingenuity, they make up funny stories and songs about the people coming in and out of a store. We cannot give our children imagination, motivation, confidence, or self-esteem. These are developed internally within the context of the safe and supportive relationships and rich experiences we provide for and expose our children to. We can paint the scenery, provide the props, share our interests and sense of wonder, but then need to step back and let our children exercise their own mental and physical muscles to make up stories, create games, and direct the show. It can be messy, but also amazing and joyful to watch.

Certainly there is merit in organized sports, dance classes, piano lessons, etc., but these kinds of activities have overtaken what little free time children have, especially as they get older and have more homework to tackle after school. Maybe it's time to "schedule in" free time and opened-ended playgroups, not just for preschoolers, but also for elementary kids and up, to just 'be' without an agenda. Time to look at how we can infuse the priceless gifts of time and freedom back into our children's lives. Our kids will be healthier and more capable, emotionally and physically, and our family lives will be more full of joy.

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