

Time Just to Be

Written by Rae Pica

Monday, 01 September 2008 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 05 February 2014 09:46

The stories I hear from parents never cease to amaze me. Like the one from the mom who was feeling pressured to enroll her two-and-a-half-year-old in the local soccer program—the local, *competitive* soccer program!

“Our town,” she said, “is very much into pushing children to compete and succeed. And I know other parents are looking at me as though I’m failing my child, but I’m not going to give in to the pressure. I’m not enrolling her in all these programs at age two.”

Good for her! Whether it’s a fear that their children won’t get into the college of their choice, will never find their passions, or will become lazy and unmotivated if they aren’t constantly engaged in organized activities, too many of today’s parents are responsible for their children being overscheduled with no time just to be.

MOVING AND LEARNING



TIME JUST TO *be*

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Good for her! Whether it’s a fear that their children won’t get into the college of their choice, will never find their passions, or will become lazy and unmotivated if they aren’t constantly engaged in organized activities, too many of today’s parents are responsible for their children being overscheduled with no time just to be.

What happens when a child’s time is scheduled and programmed—dictated by someone else—from morning ’til night, day after day? One mother wrote to me, “If the parents work a full day and the children are in a traditional school, the child goes to care before school at around 7:30 AM, then goes to school, then goes to after school care until around 5:30 PM. Then they have two hours of homework. If you add in one sport per season, they have two hours of practice or games once or twice a week. So the child’s ‘workday’ is more than twelve hours!”

In addition to the stress it causes, an over-scheduled, over-programmed life at an early age ensures the child will never be able to entertain herself, she will never be able to live inside her own head, she will not be able to deal with solitude or quiet time. She may not get much of it as an adult, but for her sake I hope there will be some. And when there is, it would be awfully sad if she felt disappointed at the idea of having to hang around around and therefore felt she absolutely had to be in the company of others.

If parents want their children to grow up to be successful, they have to make sure their kids start practicing now. That means they have to ensure their children have plenty of unstructured time, preferably in big, uninterrupted chunks of time.

Rebecca Lark, early childhood educator and author, says that the chunks of time children need for unstructured play will vary according to their level of development. Toddlers, she maintains, require a minimum of 30 minutes to engage in play activities that interest them. Preschoolers need 45 to 60 minutes. And early elementary children who are focused on their play may need an hour or more to bring their work to a conclusion.

Here are some questions excerpted from my book, *A Running Start*:

- If children begin losing the ability to childhood, what will they have to look forward to?
- How can we ensure our children won’t be harmed not from all the pushing and pressure before they’ve even reached puberty?
- If we’ve covered them to miss the magic of childhood, what will look later dawn upon to cope with the trials and tribulations of adulthood?
- What will become of the childlike nature adults call on when they need reminding of the delight found in simple things—when they need to bring out the playfulness that makes life worth living?
- What joy will our children find as adults if sticking to “success” becomes life’s sole purpose?

Let’s rethink the values of unstructured, smaller playtime compared with the all-too-common, scheduled and over-structured activities we have been led to believe are so beneficial.

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In addition to the stress it causes, an over-scheduled, over-programmed life at an early age assures the child will never be able to entertain herself; she will never be able to live inside her own head; she will not be able to deal with solitude or quiet time. She may not get much of it as an adult, but for her sake I hope there will be some. And when there is, it would be awfully sad if she felt panicked at the idea of having to keep herself amused and therefore felt she absolutely had to be in the company of others.

If parents want their children to grow up to be resourceful, they have to make sure their kids start practicing now. That means they have to ensure their children have plenty of unstructured time, preferably in big, uninterrupted chunks of time.

Rebecca Isbell, early childhood educator and author, says that the chunks of time children need for uninterrupted play will vary according to their level of development. Toddlers, she maintains, require a minimum of 30 minutes to remain in play activities that interest them. Preschoolers need 45 to 60 minutes. And early elementary children who are focused on their play may need an hour or more to bring their work to a conclusion.

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If we've caused them to miss the magic of childhood, what will kids later draw upon to cope with the trials and tribulations of adulthood?

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What will become of the childlike nature adults call on when they need reminding of the delight found in simple things—when they need to bring out the playfulness that makes life worth living?

- What joy will our children find as adults if striving to “succeed” becomes life's sole purpose?

Let's rethink the values of unstructured, creative playtime compared with the all-too-common, scheduled and over-structured activities we have been led to believe are so beneficial.

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