

Pressurized Children, Pressurized Adults: Let's Find Time for Play

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In 1981 psychologist Dr. David Elkind published his bestselling book *The Hurried Child*. He described the increasing demands placed on children by parents and other adults to achieve and succeed. Elkind contended that these “hurried” children were being robbed of their childhood and in the process were vulnerable to such adverse consequences as burning out in school, using drugs and alcohol, and feeling helpless.

Borrowing from the title of Elkind’s book, I gave a number of presentations for parents in the late 1980s called “The Pressurized Child.” I attempted to capture the pressure that many children and adolescents feel on a daily basis and how they are left with a noticeable absence of joy and spontaneity in their lives. I also discussed strategies for implementing more realistic expectations and challenges for children that permitted them to experience fun and a zest for life. I have continued to advance this message in my seminars about raising resilient children.

The topic of the hurried or pressurized child is as relevant, if not more so, today as when Elkind first wrote his book. Behind most pressurized youngsters are pressurized parents and other caregivers. I continue to be impressed by the number of parents who lament that not only do they have limited time for their children, but their children have limited time for them as schedules are filled with sports, dance, art lessons, and homework. “Free time” is a shrinking commodity in many households. Even certain activities that have the potential for providing enjoyment and fun, such as youth sports, have become pressure cookers for far too many children.

Given my interest in the phenomenon of the pressurized child (and family), I was drawn to a recent article in *The Boston Globe* titled, “Whistles blow for alpha families to call a timeout: Some wonder if youths are driven too hard” written by Tatsha Robertson. It focused on the efforts of Ridgewood, New Jersey and other towns in the United States to examine the demands that are placed upon children. The article starts, “Residents of this affluent suburb (Ridgewood) of New York City are so

competitive, at work and play, that they speak proudly of living in an 'alpha town.' Mothers and fathers charge hard on Wall Street, then come home and encourage their children to show the same go-go spirit in activities. French lessons can begin as early as age 3, resume-building at 6, and some children play on five sports teams at once."

Community leaders in Ridgewood organized a meeting to encourage parents to slow down, enjoy time with their children, and emphasize the importance of having fun rather than being the best. Robertson writes, "In a smattering of cities and towns from New Jersey to Nebraska, educators, coaches, and psychologists are preaching a similar message to local audiences—against the grain of a national trend that Ridgewood represents to the extreme. Concerned about stressed, overscheduled children and the growing number of sports-related injuries to their young bodies, along with rundown parents with whistles and scoresheet constantly in hand, these advocates are calling for a return to the days of hopscotch, tag, and hide-and-seek, when childhood play was mostly about fun, not bringing home a trophy."

Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, a New York psychiatrist and author of *The Over-Scheduled Child* observes, "What's happened is that childhood has become professionalized. Parenting has become the most competitive sport in America." In response to parents signing up their children to play in several sports at once, Rosenfeld noted, "What is sad is despite all the evidence that this is not good, the social pressure to do this is if you don't, then you are considered a remiss parent."

In the *Globe* article Robertson reports that a number of communities are taking steps to lessen the frenetic pace of parents and children. In Minneapolis, city leaders are seeking 1,000 families to "pledge to have a family dinner four nights a week. Local leaders in other parts of the state are asking recreation centers to create noncompetitive sports leagues. In small hamlets across the country, groups of parents have started unorganized ball games where winning is not the main goal and parents sit quietly on the sidelines. In Ridgewood, the school district has designated one Tuesday evening every March as a time of no extracurricular activity. In Sydney, New York, a town of 4,000 near Binghamton, the school superintendent has set aside Wednesdays as activity-free nights, evening shifting Board of Education meetings to other days."

As many of my readers know, I strongly support children and adolescents being involved in sports and exercise, in art and music activities. I welcome their participation in volunteer endeavors in which they learn to give to others. However, when these activities fill every waking hour of a child's life, when they are cast in competitive terms and used as criteria for "good parenting," we must pause and question, as Elkind did almost a quarter of a century ago, whether we are indeed creating "hurried," anxious children.

Communities designating a day during the week when meetings or events will not be scheduled helps to remind us of the importance of family time and "free time." Although the concept of scheduling "free time" may seem like an oxymoron, it serves to highlight that children not only require some down time, but they also need time to engage in fun activities with their families. An afternoon and/or evening without scheduled sports or other activities does not guarantee that families will use this time to interact or have fun together, but it may prompt parents to consider their interactions with and expectations for their children.

At many of my parenting workshops I have questioned the excessiveness of scheduled activities for our children, including the amount of homework they are required to do (I may address the issue of homework in a future article). In response, some parents have said that when they have built in "free time," their children have desired to use this time playing video games. I have suggested that if that is the case, parents should join their children in playing such games (it is also a way of monitoring the content of the games), but that they should also set limits on the time involved in these games.

Recently, I saw parents in my practice who were very concerned about their 7-year-old daughter and their 10-year-old son. The mother remarked, "They both seem so stressed. I'm not certain what we should do, but I feel we should do something." She smiled and said, "Maybe they inherited stress from my husband and me. All we do in our house is rush. Talk about a hyperactive, stressed out family. We can't seem to find time to just have fun."

We discussed cutting back on the number of activities in which their children were involved. In response to the mother's comment, "We can't seem to find time to just have fun," I suggested they consider ways to

“play.” The father asked what I meant and I described the importance of being spontaneous and imaginative. I shared that I had coached my sons in a basketball league and enjoyed doing so, but I also had fun just going outside and throwing a football with them or picking up a basketball and shooting hoops without keeping score. I also told them of my enjoyment “interviewing” my sons about events in their life when they were preschoolers; I used an audiotape cassette recorder since this was pre-videotape recorder days. When I played back the interview for my sons, they enjoyed listening to what they had said. It was a simple activity that elicited joy and closeness.

I also recommended that they read my good friend Dr. Ned Hallowell’s book *The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness*. Ned’s ideas resonate with those conveyed by Sam Goldstein and myself in our writings about resilience. Ned warns, “We are overemphasizing the importance of grades and other measurable achievements, while we are underemphasizing the importance of resourcefulness, optimism, ‘people skills,’ a can-do attitude, creativity, and the many forms of connectedness, such as friendship, family, community, spirituality, love of nature, team play, and so forth. It is fine to emphasize getting good grades, as long as you balance this by equally emphasizing and teaching the tools of emotional health.”

Ned extols the importance of play as a source of happiness. He defines play as “any activity in which there is room for spontaneous invention and/or change. . . . The opposite of play is doing exactly what you are told to do. Memorization by rote is the opposite of play; on the other hand, thinking up a mnemonic device to help you memorize a series of items can be very playful. . . . The reason to encourage children to play is not merely that play is a wonderful end in itself—although it is that. As a child plays, he learns a special skill—the skill of play—and it is a skill that is more useful than any other. The skill of play, of being able to make creative use of time no matter where you are or what you are doing, is the skill that lies behind all discoveries, all advances, all creative activity.”

Ned offers some tips about play including: “make time for play; limit electronic play; don’t overschedule your children with enriching activities that eliminate time for unstructured play; don’t turn youth sports into a pressure-packed, hypercompetitive drama; try to find a place where your children can be left alone to play; and keep your family alive with humor.”

As I reflected on Ned's advice, I thought about my grandchildren. I have three, the oldest of whom, Maya, is 27 months. I love interacting with Maya, Teddy, and Sophia. I love holding them and smiling at them. I marvel at how playful we are with young children and how playful they are. When the family was over for Thanksgiving, I was vividly reminded of the countless adventures that young children experience in what to an adult may appear to be an ordinary environment. It was such fun to observe Maya jumping up and falling down on our bed as if she had discovered the most interesting toy in the world or running from one room to the next and laughing as I caught up with her, or Teddy simply lying on his back looking at and touching different objects on his "3-D Activity Gym." As his actions caused the objects to move, I could not help but think that he was learning in a very playful way that he had some "control" over what transpired in his world. And when I held Sophia and she smiled in response to my smile, my own sense of playfulness was enriched.

I know that the kinds of playful activities in which we engage preschool children cannot last forever. However, I do believe that playfulness is a lifetime activity. When I have recommended to parents that they find time to play with their children in the sense that Ned defines play, I have frequently heard, "I wish I could, but who has the time. They have soccer, Little League, dance lessons, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and hours of homework." All of these are important activities and several hold the potential of being playful, but we must ensure that we build in opportunities in which we play with our children, in which our children observe us being playful, and in which we simply enjoy the moment.

When I hear the refrain, "Who has the time to do these things?" I ask a question I have found myself asking more and more lately, namely, "What is the alternative if we don't do these things?" I want children to achieve and succeed, but I want their achievement and success not to be measured solely by their grades or SAT scores or how many goals they score in a game, or to what colleges they are admitted. Success should also be measured by their ability to be playful, to be spontaneous, to take realistic risks, to connect with others, and to laugh. I would love to see "hurried," "pressurized," or anxious youngsters transformed into children who never lose their playfulness, who never take themselves too seriously, and similar to preschool children such as Maya, Teddy, and

Sophia, experience joy, learning, and creativity in the simplest of activities.

During this holiday season when schedules and demands can become very hectic, I hope that we all take time to discover these simplest of activities that will enrich our lives and the lives of our children.

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