

## RESTORING “CHILD TIME” TO FAMILY LIFE

By Nancy Morrow

The problem is simple enough: too much to do and not enough time to do it in. So we squeeze out another half an hour here, fifteen minutes there.

We race from one place to the next driving a little faster than we should, agonizing when the light turns red before we get to the intersection. We urge the kids to hurry up, not to dawdle. We return phone calls on the cordless phone while we fold laundry; we type frantically on the laptop while Billy has his swim lesson. Dinner is pizza or take-out, squeezed between comings and goings, cleared away just in time to start the bath water. By the end of the day, our nerves are frazzled, the kids are cranky, and we still didn't get everything done. Tomorrow we vow to move just a little bit faster --- and to make those around us move faster, too.

In her widely acclaimed 1997 book on this very problem, *The Time Bind*, San Francisco writer Arlie Hochschild describes a visit to a day care center near a large midwestern corporation: she saw it as “an island of ‘child time,’” in stark contrast to almost everywhere else she observed, including people's homes. In a place governed by “child time,” things move more slowly: the process of doing is more important than getting done, and time seems to drag on and on, for the child, deliciously --- but adults in this setting can become aggravated and frustrated.

How much “child time” do our own kids really get these days, between school or playgroup, soccer or tiny tots at the gym, between the shopping and the cooking and the cleaning? The problem of hectic schedules is not unique to those families where both parents work outside the home. All adults have things that need to be done, responsibilities to fulfill, and we've all been trained to be efficient and to judge our efficiency by the ticking clock. In fact, some studies show that stay-at-home parents, who feel the pull of “child time” most directly, may experience the most guilt when things don't get done. They may also be more likely to take on too

many responsibilities in the school or community. Since the problem of too little time is so pervasive, how can we ever really restore more “child time” to our lives?

For one thing, we need to accept that children need more time to do things that adults can do more quickly and efficiently. Then too, children rarely if ever understand the need to move faster or the reasons why they can't do something themselves because it just takes too long. Like the watched pot that never boils, the rushed child never finishes. Instead of struggling to make children, especially very young children, conform to our schedules, we need to account for “child time” in planning out the day. We need to simply assume that things will take longer than we think that they will.

Accounting for the pull of “child time” may mean waking a child earlier than usual (which probably means getting her to bed earlier), so that she has the time she needs to linger over the choice of socks or contemplate her cereal. With school-age children, discuss this issue of schedules and timelines, so that their needs and your expectations become clear. The fewer things you both have to do in the morning, the less time you'll need. So make sure the night before that homework is done, backpacks ready, and shoes laid out. Make as many decisions about tomorrow as you can before bedtime, and stick with those plans. Many children have trouble making transitions, so they need more time to finish a project (which means they need earlier warnings that it's time to move on). Some children need more time than we are willing to give them to say good bye or hello (which may mean that you need to linger with her before and after day care). You need to plan for these “transition times.”

You will want to learn how to read your own child's clues as to how much “transition time” he or she really needs. Clearly, some children dawdle and waste time simply to be manipulative and controlling. While we want to insure that children get sufficient “child time,” we also want them to be appropriately responsible and considerate. Most experts insist that it is important not to give in to outrageous demands about time or to let guilt

about the time you spend away from your child influence your responses when you are with them. Time issues need to be negotiated in reasonable and mutually satisfying ways, using the kinds of limits we set in other areas. If some part of your daily routine isn't working either for you or your child, try something else.

Restoring "child time" may also mean rethinking our own ideas about how children should spend their time. Most children today are probably, like their parents, "overscheduled," that is, involved in too many structured activities, leaving little time for free play. Despite our concerns that older children today spend too much time unsupervised at home while their parents work, children of an earlier generation probably spent just as much time hanging out in the neighborhood with other kids, or playing outside in the afternoon. Now children may have several scheduled activities each afternoon, racing from sports to music lessons to art classes, as parents try to ensure that their children become "well rounded." Not only do all these appointments create time stress --- the logistics of it all can become daunting --- but in these situations, children get few opportunities to socialize naturally, get to know other children well, or make their own choices about how to spend their time. At the same time, we need to set limits on the choices they can make in their free time. Even if it is how a child wants to spend his time, no one should pass the afternoon watching hours of television or playing video games. We want to expose our children to a variety of enriching leisure pursuits.

"Child time" differs from what we call "quality time" in that it is governed completely by the child's internal rhythms, which are less predictable and more spontaneous than those of adults. We now know that

relying on "quality time" doesn't really work, because spontaneity can't be planned. But special times where your child gets to direct your activities can be. In his acclaimed book about school-age children, *Playground Politics*, Stanley Greenspan advocates something he calls "floor time," as a first step to nurturing healthy parent-child relationships. "Floor time" is at least 30 minutes a day of unstructured time where a parent and an individual child interact through talk and play, and where the parent follows the child's lead completely and engages in the kinds of pretend games or make-believe the child enjoys most. (Greenspan notes that reading to a child or watching television together may be useful, but these activities do not serve the same function as floor time.) Through "floor time" you show your children that you are fully present to them and open to their needs, interests, and concerns. It's not a time to insist that children open up about what happened at school, to pursue your own agenda, or even to seek solutions to problems your children might be having. It is just a time to be together in the way the child prefers. Parents who want to try to use floor time as a way of connecting with their children need to participate without expecting concrete outcomes --- an attitude that can be hard for busy, productive parents to muster. As Greenspan notes, "most of us have difficulty shifting from the pace of the rest of our lives."

Finally, we need to remember that while "child time" is about moving slower and being open to the spontaneous, children thrive on routines and rituals. Restoring "child time" may also mean cultivating family routines like cleaning the house together on Thursday night or walking the dog together each afternoon after school or work. Even where parents have hectic, varied, or untraditional work schedules, establishing rituals like those surrounding bath time and bed time, for example, are important for helping a child cope with structure and feel secure. One other thing experienced parents know about time with children: it passes much too quickly and our children may be grown before we know it.

