

HURRIED PARENT, HURRIED CHILD

The Apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Have you ever heard a three-year old say to his laid-back parents: "Hurry up. Stop dawdling. We're going to be late"? Neither have I.

We were all kids once. Who knew about clocks and time? We didn't dawdle – we explored! We moved according to our natural rhythms, allowing time for distraction, curiosity and playing with our toys. Was that so bad? Apparently. Many of us had that comfortable tempo programmed out of us by hurried parents who were Type A, impatient or had simply become accelerated by the demands of modern life. At first, we dragged our feet and resisted. But, eventually, we learned to imitate their behavior and conform to their expectations.

Hurried parents become role models. They set the pace for their children by the number of activities they try to juggle, and the speed and sense of urgency they bring to their lives. This "volume and velocity" leads to overload.

What are we teaching our kids? What signals are we sending? If we're hard-driving, overloading our schedules and constantly rushing, kids notice. Some of them get stressed out just watching us! (In case you've wondered, stress is contagious.)

Another way parents transmit messages is through belief systems. Beliefs are premises and assumptions, mostly held subconsciously, about how the world works, how people should behave and thoughts about ourselves. These are the messages that run our lives. Examples include: Success comes from hard work; You should always be busy; I can't sit still. We hold these messages as "The Truth" so they become the truth for us. Sometimes we teach these lessons overtly – ("It has to be perfect" or "You can't play until you clean up your room"). Other times, the messages are subtle and implied – such as a sigh of impatience when children move slowly.

We also convey messages by over-programming children; keeping them constantly busy; enrolling them in lessons, leagues and activities; filling their days with soccer, ballet, piano, tutoring, homework and chores.

How can we reverse this trend? One step is for us to slow down and balance our own lives. That will set a better example – and reduce our stress. Another is to stop pushing and pressuring our kids. It's important to expose children to different activities but not to push them too much – especially when it's clear they're not picking up on it. We need to open doors, let youngsters experiment and, then, let them decide which doors to walk through. The only activity my wife and I required our children to master was swimming. This was mostly for safety reasons but also to prepare them for water sports in the future. Other than that, we allowed them to pick and choose from the variety of things they were exposed to.

Timing is another issue. There's a concept called maturational readiness. Infants usually start walking at about one year but, sometimes, it's 15 or 18 months. Eventually they all catch up. It's the same with learning to talk, read or use numbers. But many parents want to accelerate the process, getting their kids off to a fast start. Child psychologist David Elkind notes in his

excellent book, “The Hurried Child”, that children who start to read early may not achieve as much as their parents think. “Although the children who started earlier had an initial advantage on the reading tests used to assess pupil progress, this advantage disappeared by the time the children were in grade 4.” In addition, they found that, by the teen years, “the adolescents who were introduced to reading late were more enthusiastic, spontaneous readers than were those who were introduced to reading early”. We’re raising kids, not training prodigies. Conscientious parenting has a place but, as one book titled noted, “Einstein Didn’t Use Flash Cards”. They’re only young once – let them enjoy it!

Kids often find their way back to things when we don’t push. We have a son who started playing piano at age six. When he was eight, he became frustrated and unhappy and wanted to quit. Realizing there was no benefit in pushing, we agreed. A year later, when his younger brother started lessons, my wife encouraged him to give it another try. This time it clicked and, over time, his progress soared. He’s now in university, plays the piano beautifully and practises at every opportunity. I doubt that would have happened if we’d pressured him when he wasn’t ready.

There’s a neat irony here: when parents stop over-programming and hyper-parenting their children, the adults benefit too. Their own lives slow down. There’s less chauffeuring from one activity to another, freeing up time for both parents and kids. It also allows for more family time and a less hurried home atmosphere.

People often talk about “quality time” with children. But it’s hard to have quality time without quantity of time. You can’t turn moods and receptiveness on and off like a switch, especially as kids get older. (Try walking up to your teenager and saying “It’s 8 o’clock – let’s talk”). But if we’re available, they may wander into the room and start talking or say “Wanna play ping pong?” That’s when they’re ready to have “quality” time.

Just as adults need breaks, children need unstructured time too. This is not frivolous or wasted time. It’s a time for them to play, to use their imagination, to learn to problem-solve, to develop social and language skills and to increase their ability to learn. This unstructured time needs to be spent with siblings, peers and even alone, without parents hovering.

Hurried Parent, Hurried Child. Whether unconsciously or with good intentions, we created this problem. And we can solve it. We can step back and slow things down. And when we do, everyone wins.

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