

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE EFFECTS OF OVER-SCHEDULING ON THE FAMILY

Submitted to Dr. Dan Burrell

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

DSMN 610 – B01

Family Discipleship

by

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June 30, 2016

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern times brought a variety of changes and new priorities to many families with time as the centerpiece. Being a child in the Generation Z may not be too far from the pressures of the futuristic movie *In Time*<sup>1</sup> where people had time ticking off their arms as they scamper to complete their tasks by the end of the day in order to be paid their wages – another 24 hours. In the movie, set in 2169, time was the most important thing and the greatest stressor for those people, because time was the currency that drives businesses and pay the bills. In today's reality, it seems more and more families find themselves strapped for time. Children and youth are busier than ever playing a myriad of sports while simultaneously juggling homework, academic-related clubs, and other related and time-demanding activities<sup>2</sup>.

Parents, likewise, are increasingly busy. The home serves as more of a hotel than a place where families gather to spend quality time with one another. Parents enlist their children in many worthwhile activities to keep them busy, out of trouble, and with good

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<sup>1</sup> *In Time*, film (United States: 20th Century Fox, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Feiler Bruce, "Overscheduled Children: How Big A Problem?", *The New York Times*, last modified 2013, accessed June 1, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/fashion/over-scheduled-children-how-big-a-problem.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/fashion/over-scheduled-children-how-big-a-problem.html?_r=0).

influences<sup>3</sup>. Being involved in activities does have benefits for children, but overscheduling also exerts a negative impact on the modern-day family. As defined in a parenting book authored by Chris Illuminati, overscheduling is “the habit of enrolling kids in too many extracurricular activities — anything from sports and playdates to tutoring and music lessons — and filling up every moment outside of school with a learning experience”<sup>4</sup>.

The goal of this paper is to explore the effects of overscheduling on families. Getting kids busy in school work and extracurricular activities is not bad, per se. Such activities work well as long as kids enjoy and learn at their own pace and have some time for themselves. *While different activities in and out of school enrich children’s perspective of life, parents should not overschedule these activities because a balanced life makes way for more connected families bridged through God-centered experiences.*

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Gray, "Over-Scheduling Kids May Be Detrimental to Their Development", *CBSNews*, last modified 2014, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/over-scheduling-kids-may-be-detrimental-to-their-development/>.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Illuminati, *The New Dad Dictionary: Everything He Really Needs To Know - From A To Z* (Avon: F + W Media, 2015), 181.

## TIRED CHILDREN ARE UNHAPPY CHILDREN

Parents should not overschedule their children's activities because tired children are unhappy children. Overscheduling is a problem, first and foremost because "the kids end up feeling tired, stressed, and unhappy, just like an adult would, when they have too much to do and not enough time for themselves"<sup>5</sup>. Parents are given the unenviable task of raising human beings "from a state of complete dependence to a state of complete independence so that we can release them to God by the time they reach maturity"<sup>6</sup>. Some parents become too eager of this task and tend to overdo parenting. They schedule activities not a little more than too many, but too much, to say the least — a range of classes from ballet, to violin, to karate, as well as sports and neighborhood games. Without even realizing, parents subject their children to more pressure for intellectual and physical achievement. When this happens, parents rob their own children of childhood<sup>7</sup>.

Physically and emotionally, children can only handle so much pressure and activity load that their developmental stage automatically set by God's design allows. Children enjoy school and activities, but pleasure does not in any way prevent them from feeling tired. Whether the child is highly motivated to learn the lessons in school or a social butterfly who enjoys playtime with the other kids, a day in school drains the child's

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Sherlock, *Living Simply With Children* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Boa, "Perspectives On Parenthood", Bible.Org, last modified 2016, accessed June 1, 2016, <https://bible.org/article/perspectives-parenthood>

<sup>7</sup> Sherlock, 173.

energy<sup>8</sup>. When children are tired, they are angry, irritable, and unhappy<sup>9</sup>. Besides being unhappy, parents do not want to make their children tired due to overscheduling because tired children get sick more easily, are prone to more accidents, do not eat well, and do poorly in school<sup>10,11</sup>.

There is nothing wrong in allowing kids to engage in extracurricular and community activities. These offer learning experiences for kids. Among the advantages of other activities in and out of school are: (1) learning to work with others; (2) exposure to tasks, which enhance planning and analytical skills; and (3) opening of new experiences that spark the children's interest<sup>12</sup>. It cannot be denied that from one or more of the activities that a child is exposed to, that the child will gain interest and eventually develop skills associated with such activity.

Parents, should not, however, overlook the fact that too many activities will not permit children enough time to perform important things in their childhood life<sup>13</sup>. Over and above extracurricular and other activities, there are things that children need to do in their free time that adults may not even realize. No matter how an adult views it (free time or play time), this temporal space is important to children. In fact, even the Greek philosopher Plato recognized the importance of play to children arguing that "the most

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<sup>8</sup> William G Wilkoff, *Is My Child Overtired?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 163.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte E Thompson, *Prescription (Rx) For Parenting: How To Raise Healthy Infants And Children* (Ocala: Atlantic Publishing Group, 2015), 64.

<sup>10</sup> Nadine Perkinson-Gloor, Sakari Lemola and Alexander Grob, "Sleep Duration, Positive Attitude toward Life, And Academic Achievement: The Role of Daytime Tiredness, Behavioral Persistence, and School Start Times", *Journal of Adolescence* 36, no. 2 (2013): 311-318.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Illuminati, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things”<sup>14</sup>. Free time to play is the primary mechanism by which children learn, socialize, and develop towards mature adulthood<sup>15</sup>.

There are other implications of tired, unhappy children aside from physical or physiological consequences. These repercussions pertain to family relationships and man’s relationship with God. Every family has one top priority: “... seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you”<sup>16</sup>. As reiterated in an online Christian article, the sequence of priority from the Scriptures is clear - God, family, and career/ministry<sup>17</sup>. For children who do not yet have a career, the third priority is school and related activities. However, when a child’s life is overscheduled by parents, the first of the two more important priorities are often left out.

Children who are tired due to overscheduling creates trouble for the family, especially in today’s common family set-up, where both parents are also working. Tired children and tired parents typically result in a troubled family<sup>18</sup>. This common family set-up is another reason why families need God’s enlightening grace now more than ever. However, when children in the family are subjected to intentional or even unintentional overscheduling, with the parents’ best intentions for their own good, families spend less

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<sup>14</sup> Neil Carr, *Children's and Families' Holiday Experience* (Abingdon, Oxon, England: Routledge, 2011), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mat. 6:33 (New King James Version [NKJV]).

<sup>17</sup> Boa, *op cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, *op. cit.*

time bonding. Good children, Boa<sup>19</sup> underscored, are products of prudent cultivation in imbibing the Christian values; and this takes time. From Ephesians 6:4, fathers are instructed to “bring them [their children] up in the training and admonition of the Lord”<sup>20</sup>. This suggests that the Christian family may need to limit activities outside the home and eliminate unnecessary parental responsibilities to spend not just quality time, but a substantial quantity of time, with their children. Boa<sup>21</sup> sustains this in his article about Christian family perspectives.

It is never recommended that parents wait for signs of an overscheduled child before they let up on indiscriminately manipulating their children’s schedule. Signs may include constant complaints of a child’s tiredness. Sometimes, a child does not even know that he or she is already very tired, but may whine about feeling something which does not feel right. Other signs are: problematic schoolwork, loss of interest in a hobby or activity he or she used to be fond of, or direct rejection of or apparent disappointment about a scheduled extracurricular activity<sup>22</sup>. At any rate, an overscheduled child is tired, and there are many ways that a tired, unhappy child manifests this.

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<sup>19</sup> Boa, *op cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Eph. 6:4 (NKJV).

<sup>21</sup> Boa, *op cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Illuminati, *op cit.*



## BALANCE BETTER PREPARES CHILDREN FOR ADULTHOOD

In addition to the spiritual, physical, and physiological needs, there are other essentials to prepare children for adulthood. Spiritual growth can be enriched through consistent parental coaching on Christian values. The physical and physiological consequences that overscheduled children are exposed to can be addressed by laying low on both parental and children's activities. On top of the stress that overscheduling causes in children, it is also "developmentally inappropriate for children"<sup>23</sup>. Overscheduling kids puts them at risk of confusing their self-identification with respect to their interests. Moreover, children, like adults, also need time for themselves.

The balance of life also has a psychosocial component. Underpinned by the self-determination theory (SDT), a study in 2009 showed that adolescents who experience balance in the satisfaction of their needs across important life domains, including school, home, peer relationships, and in part-time jobs, reported to have higher levels of well-being and are better able to adjust in school. SDT views three universal needs, in terms of the degree to which they are satisfied, as essential nutrients that human beings require to maintain their psychological health. These needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness<sup>24</sup>. The three psychological needs are defined as follows:

"Autonomy refers to the experience of choice and personal endorsement of one's activities and actions. Competence refers to feelings of mastery over one's environment and ability to bring about desired outcomes. Finally, relatedness reflects feelings of closeness and connection with significant others. According to

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<sup>23</sup> Sherlock, *op cit.*

<sup>24</sup> M. Milyavskaya et al., "Balance across Contexts: Importance of Balanced Need Satisfaction across Various Life Domains", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35, no. 8 (2009): 1031-1045.

SDT, the key to healthy development and adaptation in a given context is the amount of psychological need satisfaction one experiences in that context” (Milyavskaya et al. 2009, p. 1032).

The findings of the Milyavskaya et al.<sup>25</sup> study suggest that when children are overscheduled in school and school-related activities, which just comprise one of the many domains of their life, the satisfaction of their needs in the other domains (home, relationships, church, etc.) will be compromised. These children, therefore, do tend to suffer from an imbalance in the psychosocial aspect of their development towards adulthood and maturity. Parents should not, therefore, attempt to or continue to overschedule their children’s activities because that would be contrary to Scripture. In Deuteronomy 6, God commands parents to love God above all and to train their children to do the same:

“And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. **7** You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (Deut. 6:4-7, ESV).

Note that Deut. 6:7 is quite straightforward about how parents are to carry out the spiritual development of their children. Growth and maturity towards adulthood is physical, physiological, psychosocial, and spiritual. The implications of overscheduled children are the magnified risk of losing family time.

However, there are bigger implications of overscheduling children in activities, which are facilitated by adults who care more about the prestige of success and/or victory and less about the young children charged under their care. Take the case of author Jeff Pearlman, who decried his brother’s experience as a soccer player in a community

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<sup>25</sup> Milyavskaya et al., *ibid.*

league. The article was published online at The Wall Street Journal<sup>26</sup>. His parents had the best of intentions as they only wanted his brother, a painfully shy, socially awkward child, with very few friends to benefit from the camaraderie of team sports. The friendship his parents dreamed of, however, turned into a nightmare. The soccer coach only made his brother realize more clearly that he was lousy at sports and a useless soccer player.

Pearlman and his parents learned the hard way through an irresponsible, supposedly steward of young learners' well-being that "children don't need the hostilities of organized youth athletics to make them whole"<sup>27</sup>. It is not that engaging young children in team sports is wrong, but parents need to walk the extra mile to verify if their child will really be in good hands. Parents can always recommend worthwhile activities to their children, but only after careful appraisal of how such activity will affect the child's schedule.

Most importantly, parents need to recommend activities that their children like or are at least are willing or anxious to try — this entails autonomy. Likewise, parents need to wait for the signs; if the child enjoys the activity, if he or she believes he is doing well or can better improve in the activity — this entails competence. Parents need to confirm how the activity impacts the child's peer relationships with the other children he or she encounters in the activity — this entails relatedness. The child's spiritual growth should never be ignored. Balance prepares children towards adulthood.

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<sup>26</sup> Jeff Pearlman, "Why I Don't Want My Kids to Play Team Sports", The Wall Street Journal, last modified 2013, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/11/05/why-i-dont-want-my-kids-to-play-team-sports/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## LESS STRUCTURE FOSTERS A MORE CONNECTED FAMILY

Parents should not overschedule their children because a less structured life makes way for more interesting and enriching God-filled experiences that Christian families seek to achieve. Others may call this family bonding, parent-child bonding, or family-connectedness. The big question, however, is ‘how can families bond or connect if children are overscheduled and parents are overworked?’

A scientific study conducted by Barker et al.<sup>28</sup> showed that children who spend more time in less structured activities benefit from better self-directed executive functioning. On the other hand, children who spend more time engaged in structured activities have poorer self-directed executive functioning. Executive functioning refers to the cognitive control processes of the brain which regulate how humans think and act in support of goal-directed behavior<sup>29</sup>.

When children are overscheduled, it is expected that their parents enlisted them for a plethora of activities. The scenario becomes worse if the child signed up for some other personal interests on top of parental preferences. Worse, if both parents are working and they hardly see each other on a week day even on the meal table. Values formation for the child suffers if time for parent-child bonding is set aside to make way for the children’s activities and the parents’ busy schedules.

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<sup>28</sup> Jane E. Barker et al., "Less-Structured Time in Children's Daily Lives Predicts Self-Directed Executive Functioning", *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Cognitive development also suffers, as verified from the Barker et al. study, because children's activities are practically structured ones. Organized team sports, music lessons or instruction in playing instruments, and the like constitute structured activities. Meanwhile, art activities and reading for pleasure are considered less structured. On the other hand, hanging out with a group of peers in a neighborhood park or relaxing on the couch with friends or siblings talking about an experience, biking, walking, and camping are unstructured activities<sup>30</sup>.

Less structure in children's activities help families connect with each other. There is less pressure and stress when children engage in less structured activities because they do not get physically and emotionally drained. With regular and increased time for family bonding, both parents and children are spiritually charged with Scripture readings. This is the ideal scenario.

The real-world scenario is, however far from ideal. As revealed from the evidence of Doherty, children are overscheduled and there is a major decline in the amount of free time among children 3 to 12 years old. Free time declined by 12 hours each week, play time, by three hours or 25% each week, and unstructured activities by 50%. There should be no surprise for such declining statistics because there is a corresponding increase in structured sports participation by 50%. Moreover, passive spectator leisure or watching sports increased five-fold, still not including the time spent by children in watching

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<sup>30</sup> Lee Shumow, *Promising Practices For Family And Community Involvement During High School* (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Pub., 2009), 28.

television. Study time also increased by 50%<sup>31</sup>. These are concrete evidences that children are overscheduled, or as others say, overbooked.

The impact of the surge of structured activities in the lives of children affects families. Doherty also provided some evidence with respect to the decline of household conversations by a hundred percent. The length of family meal time decreased by 10%. Family dinners with everyone in the dinner table declined by 33%, and even family vacations over the past decade decreased by 28%. Sadly, religious participation of children 3 to 12 years old declined by 40%, the attendance of high school students in religious activities decreased by 24%. Doherty also reported the findings from another survey, that over two-thirds of children are concerned that their parents do not spend a reasonable amount of quality time with them<sup>32</sup>. Are the parents intentionally overscheduling their children to make up for their absence at home?

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<sup>31</sup> William J. Doherty, "Overscheduled Kids, Underconnected Families: The Research Evidence", accessed June 27, 2016, <https://www.uiowa.edu/~c169070/resources/overscheduled.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, while various activities in school and the community help enhance children's outlook of life and adulthood, parents should not overschedule these activities because they compromise the balance that paves the way for connected families guided by God's light. In the inevitable set-up of the typical American family, most homes have both parents working. It may appear more convenient to enlist children in as many activities to keep them busy and out of trouble while the parents work to pay bills and put food on the table. Whether intentional or not, overbooking children for so many activities may be paved with the best of hopes. However, good intentions cannot change the reality that:

1. Tired children are unhappy children. There are many ways that they manifest this, including poor performance in school, poor health, and irritability or misbehavior.
2. Balance, not too many activities, prepare children for adulthood. Giving the child autonomy to choose activities interesting and enjoyable to him or her to satisfy competence needs, and to associate with the significant people in each life domain helps achieve that balance.
3. Less structure fosters more connected families bridged through God-centered experiences. The parent-child bond leads the child to God.

Overscheduling children take its toll on the family. It robs children of their childhood and steals time for values formation towards a Scripture-inspired way of raising children, and it takes the focus of the family away from Christ.

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