Too busy not to play

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Parents' lives today are very busy and many complain about being time-poor. Society seems to be addicted to busyness, with people out of breath trying to catch up and keep up. Busyness even seems to be a symbol of success, but what is the price and who pays it?

Stress, tiredness, and burnout take a personal toll on busy lives, but the greatest effects of busyness is on the lives of families. Families can easily become too busy to play with their children, too busy to build quality relationships with them, too busy to be available and affirming. If parents are not careful, they can achieve both teaching and ministry success but leave their families fractured and fragmented.

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Parents long for their children to have a lifelong, saving connection to God and His church and they hope to leave a spiritual legacy of faith. Busyness however has a huge impact on children's spiritual development as it prevents parents from spending time with their children. "As parents we must realise that when we play with our kids today, we are earning the right to shape their values tomorrow. Children are more likely to embrace the values of someone they love and enjoy than someone they don't" (Bruner & Stroope, 2010, p. 100).

The years before the age of fourteen are very important as they are the years where spiritual identity is formed. It is when worldview is formed and when life-lasting values, attitudes and beliefs are put in place. George Barna in his research found that if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour before their teen years the chance of their doing so at all is very slim (Barna, 2003, p. 34)

Be available and affirming

Parents who want to be the primary faith developers of their children need to slow down and become very intentional about building relationships. They need to choose to connect with their children. This heart connection is so important that it is worth fighting for, both to get it and to maintain it. For faith to develop children need to receive unconditional love in a relationship that is trustworthy, open and honest.

A qualitative Adventist study conducted in Australia by Dr David McClintock explored the experience of faith transmission across generations. It noted conditions that appeared to lead to successful faith transmission and conditions that may lead to the rejection of personal and corporate faith. One of his ten major findings was that strong family faith traditions and good relationships within the family provoked positive memories and were great vehicles of ensuring maximum faith transmission. He found that families who managed to transmit faith had open, supportive communication with a sense of relational nurturing (McClintock, 1997, pp. 3–19).

Case study 1

During childhood Kathleen barely got to know her dad. A successful professional, his long hours and business travel kept him away from home during the week. His church activities consumed his weekends. His heart was right but his schedule was full. Consequently he had little relationship with Kathleen during her critical childhood years.

Later during adolescence, Kathleen struggled with low self-worth. But since no foundation of trust had been built between them, she never shared these feelings with her father. Between acne, roller-coaster emotions, and boys, she could have used a daddy's hug. And he would have given it to her had she invited him into her world. But she didn't.

By the time Kathleen was in high school, the tension between her and her father was thick. Whenever he led the family in prayer or read a short devotion, her body stiffened. As the family marched dutifully into church behind her father, the deacon, Kathleen felt sick to her stomach. Every fault in his life was magnified for her and profound disrespect burned in her heart. "What a hypocrite!" Kathleen thought. Mr 'Holier than thou' thinks he can cram religious garbage down my throat.

When she left home as a young adult, she left the faith of her family as well. Despite her father's best intentions and diligent efforts to instil Christian values, those values didn't take. Kathleen rejected them, not because they were bad, but because they were his. Kathleen needed more than mere knowledge of her father's faith; she needed a relationship with her father's heart.
(Bruner & Stroope, 2010, p. 91)

Be attached

Neufeld and Mate in their book *Hold on to your kids*, talk about parent/child relationships in the context of attachment. They found that the influence that we have on our child is dependent on the attachment that they have with us. "For a child to be open to being parented by an adult, he must be actively attaching to that adult, be wanting contact and closeness with him" (Neufield & Mate, 2006, p. 6).

Attachment is one of the major developmental tasks of infancy and this will usually evolve into emotional closeness and intimacy. However, this later emotional closeness is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as today's strong peer culture is undermining this intimacy and not reinforcing the parent child bond.

Parents do not intend to completely give up their influence to the influence of peers, but unless they are proactive in forming a secure relationship they may find that even their young children are following and internalising values from their peers. Neufeld and Mate suggest that the relationship that we have with our children, must be our highest priority and that parents need to establish daily rituals that become quality times of connection especially after periods of absence.

Be authentic

Faith is caught as much as it is taught so parents need to have a vibrant and authentic faith. Majorie Thompson says that children need to see their parents setting aside time for prayer, worship, reflection and open discussion about issues of faith. Families are to be the body of Christ (Thompson, 1996).

Parents are even more important than what is happening at church in the shaping of faith. Christian Smith states: "The research is clear; if you want to know what the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents will look like in the future, then, look at the religious and spiritual lives of their parents today" (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 26).

Ivy Beckworth in her book "Postmodern Children's Ministry" agrees that, "If the child's parents and caregivers show that listening to and following God's story is a priority for them, then the child will model those attitudes. If the important adults in the child's life practice the spiritual disciplines, worship God and make time to care for their own souls, then the child will find ways to mirror these behaviours in their own life" (Beckworth, 2004, p. 53).

Parents want their children to gain and retain a living faith but current statistics reveal that somewhere between 60 and 90% of children currently attending church programs are going to leave the church. Mark Holman quotes research by David Kinnaman who found that the reason that young people were leaving was hypocrisy. Why? It seems they were raised in an environment where Christianity was practised and expressed primarily at church and not at home. Christianity was something that their families put on one day a week, but when they went home there was no faith talk, no prayer, no Bible reading and no Christian living (Holman, 2010, p. 28, 29).

Case study 2

Becky, a 21 year old university student, had grown up knowing that her dad attended church services regularly. What she didn't know was that he began most days by praying and reading his Bible at 5.30 in the morning, while it was quiet and still in the house, before heading off to work. One day Becky got up early to prepare for an exam she had later in the morning. She discovered her dad at the kitchen table reading his Bible. She was greatly surprised, although she had wondered why the Bible always rested on top of the microwave. Now she knew, and that moment touched her life in ways that her dad's routine attendance at worship service had not.

The Christian faith gained new vitality for her as she witnessed in her dad a commitment to living and growing in his faith in a way she had never known before. In that early-morning discovery, two worlds were bridged together. Later, as she reflected on that moment, in a university course exploring the connection between church and culture, she concluded, "I think I'm going back to church". (Anderson & Hill, 2003, p. 106, 107)

Faith is too important to be kept simply between God and yourself. For faith to have the power to transform the lives of children it needs to be lived out in the open and not only behind closed doors.

> ***"For faith to have the power to transform the lives of children it needs to be lived out in the open"***

Establish spiritual routines, rituals and worship traditions

Children's spirituality experts, scripture and recent empirical research, all support the fact that basic spiritual routines, foster spiritual development in children. Rituals are simple spiritual routines that are intentionally repeated until they become part of the everyday life of the family. There are natural times in the child's day as described in Deuteronomy 6:7 that build faith such as when the family get up, sit at home, walk along the road and lie down. Parents need to form morning time, meal time, drive/walk time and bedtime routines of praying with their children, reading scripture and Bible stories, talking about their faith and sharing faith stories. These

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routines provide times for intimacy, teaching, discussion and informal dialogue. They provide times for giving affirmation, and modelling authenticity.

Sabbath and Friday night provide wonderful opportunities for rich spiritual family experiences and rituals. They are great times time to be present with God and to be present with one another. Many parents do not use this time well. They allow worship days to be time in which church programs separate them from their children. Worshipping with children is one of the most meaningful and relationship building activities parents can do. It builds a shared faith that creates great spiritual discussions and conversations and puts the family on the same spiritual page.

Holly Allen emphasises this in her insights from both literature and recent research. She highly recommends that families need to actively participate in intentional intergenerational faith communities. Children not only have the benefits of worshipping, learning and praying alongside their parents, but they also get to observe and interact with other adults, teens and children and be an intimate part of the conversations, worship and prayer. "The children (in her studies) who met regularly in intergenerational small groups, referred to prayer significantly more often than did the children from non-intergenerational settings" (Allen, 2012, p. 216).

Parents often look at worship from the consumer worldview of 'What's in it for me?'. They allow churches to convince them that their children are a distraction to others in worship. They are led to believe that children are too young for intergenerational worship. Trevecca Okhlom disagrees and writes that "Children between age five and eight can show the most interest in learning about how and why we worship. Also, waiting until a child reaches junior high age may be late for the most meaningful and inquisitive encounter" (Okholm, 2012, p. 13).

Be an inside out family

Children's faith will be more resilient, and meaningful if families turn themselves inside out in service to others. Diana Garland found in her "Service and Faith" project that children who get involved with their families in a calling larger than their own daily life develop what Diana calls "sticky faith". They develop a "faith that helps them stick to the church and to their beliefs into young adulthood, when their contemporaries are abandoning the church in droves" (Garland, 2010, p. 11).

Diana's study showed that those families involved in service to their community reported that they prayed, attended worship services and gave significantly more (financially) than those not involved in service. She found that a growing faith is associated with involvement in service with persons who are from different cultures and life experiences. Also, that although faith can grow in one-off service opportunities, that Christian faith is strengthened much more in activities that allow people to build long term relationships e.g. the week by week delivering of meals to frail elderly people.

A Search Institute study of Protestant congregations also found that involvement in *family* service projects during childhood and adolescence has a powerful impact on young people's growth in faith (Roehlkepartain, Naftali, & Musegades, 2000, p. 21). Merton Strommen writes that "adults who can remember as a child (aged five to twelve), doing something for others with their parents, show significantly higher faith scores than those who cannot remember being involved in this way" (Strommen, 1993, p. 70, 71).

Assess your busyness

Marilyn Sharpe writes that parents should sit down and carefully assess their busyness. She makes the following good suggestions (Sharpe, 2012):

- Take a look at what currently fills your time.
- Decide what you will continue to do.
- Decide what you will no longer do, and bow out as gracefully as possible.
- Do this "time audit" regularly.
- Talk as a family about what you value and how what you do with your time reflects those values.
- Place family time and Sabbath time on your calendar...and protect it.
- Focus on those things that really, really matter.
- Enjoy your time together.

Highly successful pastor, Andy Stanley realised that there was just not enough time to do everything each day. He assessed his busyness and made a courageous decision to put his family first. He writes that he had seen too many families sacrifice themselves under the guise of doing God's work. He acknowledges that it is difficult to get a work family balance because "if we stayed at work until everything was done we would never go home and if we stayed at home until everything on the 'to do' list and everybody's love bucket was overflowing we would never get to work."

He established a daily routine with his family that enabled them to get the support and care that they needed. He still works a 45 hour week, but he no longer prays that God will care for his family while he does God's work. His prayer to God as he walks away from consuming ministry to spend time with

his family is: “Lord, feel free to build whatever church you can build with 45 hours of my time” (Stanley, 2003).

Faith is built in the context of relationship and thus parents have the greatest potential to build faith and monitor its development. Children need parents who are intentional about creating time to play and have fun, to worship together, to serve together, to enjoy their children and for their children to enjoy them. They need parents who are not too busy to play!

There may not be time for everything—even for all the teaching and ministry that need to be accomplished, but parents must NOT be too busy to have time for their children. TEACH

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