

## PLAY DATES AND PRESSURE

Six years ago, when I was invited to be a candidate for my position here at Saugatuck, I called two or three colleagues who were already serving churches in the area to ask them what it was like to be a pastor in such a high powered, upper class community.

Lots of talent in the pews, they each said. Good financial resources. Plenty of artistic and cultural opportunities. A beautiful setting on the Sound, with good public recreation facilities. Great schools, a top notch library and a good measure of intellectual stimulation for young and old. In short, they all said, a pretty wonderful place to serve.

But one of the pastors I spoke with had young children, and he had a caveat. "It's a tough place to raise a child," he said. "There is so much pressure. You can't just be good at something; you've got to be the best. And not just the best at one thing, but lots of things. Soccer, ballet, church, tons of homework. You've got to do it all!"

I listened sympathetically, but I didn't give it much weight in my decision making process. After all, my youngest child was already a sophomore in college, and my oldest was married! And the middle one was moving to Florida. Raising children was not going to be part of my lot in life as a pastor serving a church in Westport. I'd already done that elsewhere, not just with my three, but with thirteen foster children as well.

And besides, how could it be such a challenge to raise kids in such an affluent community, with so many resources. Some of the foster kids I'd worked with had come from homes so burdened by poverty that they could never seem to rise above it. Their parents faced real challenges. But Westport parents? Lower Fairfield County parents?

But then we moved here, and I began working with our children and youth here at Saugatuck. I saw first hand just what that pastor had meant. As we struggled to schedule and hold youth group meetings and confirmation classes, I realized how very true it was and is. The pressure on our kids is tremendous. And they are often going in a thousand directions!

I was especially surprised the first time I heard the term play date. When I was a kid, you'd come home from school and do your homework, maybe have a piano lesson, or play practice or a game. But most days, you'd down the street or walk next door, and just hang out with your friends. Play a wild game of sandlot baseball, and you'd hope the big kid on the other team didn't hit the ball into the

woods, because it was the only one you had. Or you'd listen to your records. No, not 78s. I'm not that old! 45s. "Yellow Submarine" and "Light My Fire." But today, life is so full here that moms and dads actually have to schedule times for their children to play with other kids. Play dates.

A delightful *Blondie* comic strip this past August captured it well.

Dagwood is outside watering his lawn, talking with the little boy from next door named Elmo.

"I have a play date with Jimmy Janklow tomorrow at his house Mr. B," says Elmo. "From 4:15 to 4:45 we're having a ping pong match."

"Boy," says Dagwood, "You kids are really organized these days."

"You don't know the half of it," replies Elmo, "It's his turn to win!" (*Connecticut Post*, 8-5-06)

I was talking to a friend the other day. She's not a parishioner, but lives in a community like ours. "Am I a bad mother?" she asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because," she said, "I hate play dates."

I assured her that doesn't make her a bad mother, and that she's probably not alone in her frustration. In fact, I know her to be a very good mother. But her self-doubt, her questioning, is fairly typical. Many a Mom and Dad in our area feels a great deal of pressure to provide their children with every opportunity, every advantage that they can possibly offer.

But that may, at times, be counter productive. Suniya Luthar, a psychologist and professor at Columbia, has spent a fair amount of time in Westport and other affluent communities, researching the impact of our culture on kids. She writes: "In upwardly mobile communities, children are often pressured to excel at multiple academic and extracurricular pursuits to maximize their long term academic prospects—a phenomenon that may well engender high stress." (*The Culture of Affluence: Psychological Costs of Material Wealth*, 5)

In the same paper she quotes psychologist William Damon, who writes: "These are *supposed* to be the years that kids wander around and pal around without being faced with the pressures of the real world . . ." (*Ibid*, 7) And social scientist William Doherty is very blunt about it: "We're losing our kids to overscheduled hyperactivity." (*Ibid*)

**So what's a parent to do? How can a conscientious mom or dad make certain his or her child does get to take advantage of the wonderful and varied opportunities a community like ours offers, without succumbing to the pressure to do it all?**

**And, what can we do as a congregation, as a community of Christ, to lighten the load, to ease the pressure? How can we avoid becoming just one more activity that needs to be squeezed into an already overburdened schedule? As we baptized young Kerry James Cornell we promised to maintain the "life of worship and service" that he will need to grow in grace, knowledge and love. We promised to be nurturing and encouraging his parents. How do we do that in a high stress, high pressure place like lower Fairfield County?**

**I am convinced that our lesson from Mark provides an important insight that might help us sort this all out.**

**First, we need to understand the context of this story about Jesus and the children. It is placed in the book of Mark just a few short verses from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, where he will face his trial and his crucifixion. As William Barclay writes: "We will fully understand the almost poignant beauty of this passage if we remember when it happened . . . . It was [under circumstances such as these] that Jesus had time for the children. Even with such tension in his mind as that, he had . . . the heart to smile into their faces and maybe to play with them for a while."  
*(Daily Study Bible: Mark, 280)***

**Imagine being faced with the likelihood of your own arrest and execution. What could be more high pressured than that? Yet in that situation, under those circumstances, Jesus took time to stop and play with the children. He made room in his busy schedule to simply be with them.**

**It almost didn't happen. The disciples tried to keep the kids and their parents away. They knew what was in his day planner; they knew the appointments he had programmed on his Blackberry. He was too busy for kids. Other things were more important, no time for laughter and play!**

**But Jesus knew better. "Let the little children come to me," he tells Peter and James and the others. "Let them through, let them in. Make space for them."**

**Now note this: there is no indication in the text that any of the children needed to be healed. There is no indication that Jesus taught them a Bible lesson. There was no objective to their time together. He simply played with them; took them in his arms, and blessed them.**

**Moms and dads, that's what your children need and want more than anything else in the whole wide world. Sure, it's good for them to learn how to play an instrument. It's important for them to study and do well in school. It's worthwhile to play sports, or learn how to dance or to act in the school play. But more than**

**anything else, they want your time and your attention and your love, no strings attached. It is a lesson I learned too late, and it is the one regret I have about my parenting.**

**I'm not naïve. I know that as rich as our community is in material wealth and in talent, we are very poor in time. It is our most valuable commodity. But it is what our children need. They need our time.**

**So what is apparent to do? A few suggestions.**

**Those of us who are parenting children can help them deal with the pressures by being willing to set limits. Let you kids pick one or two extra curricular activities. No more. As they get older, perhaps more. And eventually give them free reign. But by setting limits early, you establish a pattern.**

**Make time for play. Make room in your schedule and theirs to simply be together and to play. Set aside a time each week when there is no scheduled outside activity—and then stick to it!**

**Research also indicates that having dinner together is a way help to kids feel a sense of support and love. I know that's hard if you work in New York. Maybe it can't happen every night, but work to make it happen at least two or three nights a week.**

**Recently we were working on the church schedule and we talked about placing some event for kids and their parents on a Sunday night. "Oh please," said one of our Moms, "Don't do that. It's the only time of the week that we can be together as a family without having to go somewhere or do something." We found another time for the event. And as Senior Pastor, I will do all in my power to see to it that we avoid that time.**

**As a church we can also work to keep our meetings brief, and get parents who serve on our boards and committees home earlier. We can think twice about scheduling extra meetings.**

**Some of us who are older can volunteer to teach church school or work in the crib room, so that the hour or two a younger parent might have spent in preparation for teaching can, instead, be spent with their children.**

**We can do a better job of making sure we don't overtax the parents in our midst. And we can offer up our words of encouragement and our prayers of support.**

**That pastor was right. It is a tough place to raise a child.**

**Two weeks ago I shared a bit with you about my disabled father, how he was hit by a drunk driver fifteen years ago, and as a result suffered brain damage. I mentioned how I had recently paid him a visit. As I was leaving I told him, "I love**

you, Dad.” And to my surprise, he had answered, “Well, I’m not sure I could say the same.”

As upsetting as that was for me, I am able to chalk it off to his twisted cortex and his atrophied brain. In part, because I know he does love me. And one of the main reasons I know that is because when we were kids, despite his being a very busy pastor, he made time to play with us. I have very fond memories of trips to the Y to go swimming with Dad and my brother. I can still picture the nighttime dips we’d take in Lake Champlain. Or the campouts and all night Monopoly games we’d have in the living room in the middle of the winter. Or the movies we would go to see together. Dad gave us the gift of time—and the gift of play. I know he loves me. No matter what he says today as he wrestles with his cognitive limitations?

I know he loves me all because he gave us the gift of time when I was just a kid. Who knew what dividends it would pay in the future? Who knew that some trips to the Y and some nighttime skinny dipping and a good number of movies, would help to assure the heart and mind of a fifty-three year old man?

Whether you like the idea of play dates, or not. Whether they are a necessary part of your lifestyle or not. There is one type of play date that is a must, and that doesn’t involve the kids down the street. It involves you as a parent making time to be with your children for no other reason than the simple fact that you love them.

And friends, it is incumbent on us as a congregation and as individuals, to help make that possible. We have some terrific parents in this congregation who need our support. And it is important for us to support them here at church and elsewhere. In our places of work, especially if we help make or enforce policy around time needs for parents. As we plan for the PTA or the school, making certain that out of home activities are not all consuming. And as we engage in other volunteer work and organized activities.

Jesus welcomed children into his company, simply by making space for them in his busy life.

You and I, whether we are parents of young children, or not, are called to do the same.

Amen  
John H. Danner