

There is No Such Thing as Quality Time

P. Donohue Shortridge

As a parent, if someone asked you if you are taking responsibility for your children, you would be insulted by the question. But in modern America, "quality time" has replaced "time" for many parents in their self evaluation of their met responsibility to their children.

When we become parents, the responsibility is a full time one. Full time means that parents are at home with their children because children build their trust in themselves from a safe and secure base. When they do not feel safe, they cannot learn. Let me say that again. When children are fearful, they cannot learn. And when their parents are not regularly with them, children are fearful. Fear in children goes beyond looking scared. It can manifest itself in as many ways as each child is unique; sleep problems, temper tantrums, clinginess, lethargy, defiance, aloofness and a myriad of other behaviors. Basically, fear makes children insecure.

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there. They may learn how to cope, but there is a wide gulf between coping and thriving. Child care teaches children how to cope. Child care is not the same as early childhood education which allows children to expand their learning experiences appropriate to their age. Early childhood education means about two or three hours a day, three to five days a week depending on the age of the child. Child care, on the other hand, de facto occurs when you leave your children somewhere all day or most of the day, most every day. No matter how "good"

or expensive or "quality" the facility, the inescapable reality is the amount time the child is in a care facility. The message you tacitly send to your child is: *you are not important enough to me for me to be with you.* No matter

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what the circumstances of your life or what you say to your child, your child internalizes that he is not first in your life, which makes him not feel safe. Young children need to spend the vast majority of their time with their parents.

What about when children reach school age? Their learning horizons have expanded as they go to school every day, but when school is over at 2:45, children need to come home rather than be placed in one more group setting. This is important for many reasons.

First of all, there needs to be enough time in the day when your child feels special and unique. His sense of specialness is provided by you in the way the day is structured. How much time does he get just with you? What percentage of the day is he in a large group? How much time is he at choice about whether he spends time alone, with a few friends or just with you? If the majority of his day is spent in group settings, he is not at choice and he is one of many children. How special would you feel?

Second, children need time to regroup after school. They need time to collect themselves, to have a snack, to download from the day and to just do nothing for awhile. And they need to feel safe to do this. But many children are latch-key children.

An empty house is not psychologically safe for children. Because you are not there, the adult responsibility of assuring physical, emotional and psychological safety for your child is left undone. Children under twelve who are left alone at home internalize the scary thought that they are responsible for whatever happens. That is an unfair burden to put on children. They cannot relax,

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day dream, imagine, read and process all that input from school today if they also have to take on the adult burden, even if only internally, of the emergency watch. Safeguarding is an adult responsibility. Compounding the problem, parents who are gone during the day telegraph fear to their children. In lieu of being there, they tell their children not to answer the door, not to go outside, not to be spontaneous and they insist that their children call mom the minute they get home from school. What message other than fear does that give the child?

And finally, they may look older, but school age children still need us for physical proximity and affection and that sense of regularity and rightness to the world. When we are home, there is no confusion in the child's mind. He internalizes that you are the parent, you are in charge and he can be the child. He feels safe to be his age.

Teenagers need their parents every day in the afternoon as well. They have seen, heard and thought of all kinds of lifestyle alternatives throughout the day. That is what teenagers do. They try on choices. Adults provide

the anchor so that teens can try on anything they can imagine, with safety. But if teens are left to fend for themselves, they are compelled to make choices they are not yet ready to make. By being there, parents tacitly provide the environmental boundaries so their teenagers can concentrate on the choices appropriate to their age and development. Further, if you are home when they arrive home in the afternoon, they are more likely to really talk to you in that casual, spontaneous atmosphere of the moment than they may many hours from now. And finally, teenagers may insist that they are all grown up, may look like it and even try on acting like it, but they are not fully grown yet. They still need us for the physical proximity, affection and that sense of regularity and rightness to the world.

There is no such thing as "quality time" as it has come to be interpreted: *from 6:00 to 9:00 in the evening, I can give my child everything he needs.* It is a myth and a delusion that we try to convince ourselves of, because the alternative is to make really radical life choices. There is no question that adults have needs, but those needs come second to the responsibilities assumed when we bring children into our life.

Just ask anyone who was raised in child care.

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fostering the authentic life of children and their families in the American culture