



PARENTS **PARKids** CHRONICLE

Growing in Grace at Grandview Park

THE PERILS OF COMPETITIVE PARENTING

BY KERI WYATT KENT

You and your squirmy 3-yr-old walk to the neighborhood playground, glad to get out of the house. Near the swings, two intense, confident mothers compare notes, each bent on proving her progeny's precocity.

"Little Ashley knows her shapes and colors already," one mom says, pushing her 2-year-old prodigy on a swing. "And she's taking French classes, so she knows them in both English and Français."

"Well, Jeremy knows his colors, but he really was having a hard time with the shapes," another mom laments. "But the flashcards have really helped. Now he's nearly got his numbers and letters as well."

You look over at your child, who is sitting in the sandbox. He's placed his plastic bucket on his head and is hitting the bucket with his toy shovel in one hand, shoving sand in his mouth with the other. Because of your obvious neglect, he's never even looked at a flashcard, and he barely speaks English, let alone French. I'm a failure, you think.

Parenting has become a highly competitive venture. The pressure often comes from seeing what other parents and children are doing and thinking, I'd better catch up, without ever stopping to question the wisdom of that. Or it's derived from reading too many ads for "developmental" products—most of which are unnecessary but play on our insecurities.

Most child development experts agree that it's important to give a child the freedom to explore his world (even by tasting sand) or simply to play (discovering cause-and-effect relationships through activities such as hitting a bucket with a shovel). These kids are more likely to grow up more creative, more self-sufficient and less stressed out than a child who is put in too many structured activities and pushed to memorize and perform too early.

If that's true, how did parenting get so competitive? Many parents (including me) are used to a business world where we are required to "prove ourselves" daily.

Like many parents, I brought that "driven-to-win" mentality into my parenting. I wanted my children to be terrific, probably because it would make me look good. I also claimed that I needed to give them every

advantage in a world that is, after all, competitive.

"No question, we parents should do our best to provide a good life for our children. But is it really in their best long-term interests (let alone ours) for us to behave as though we must personally edit every aspect of their lives to make them letter-perfect?" writes Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise in their book *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*. "Let's start with a reality check: It can't be done."

We want our kids to do well and to achieve because we think it will validate us, make us feel like we are doing a good job. We feel smug if our children hit developmental milestones early, embarrassed if they don't. We think it's our fault if our child doesn't walk as early as the neighbor's.

But the truth is—all our pushing doesn't really help. Often children who are overscheduled or pushed to achieve end up getting discouraged. Imagine giving a 2-year-old a miniature baseball mitt and hiring a coach to throw fast balls at him while yelling, "C'mon, catch it! Eye on the ball!"

We say we'd never do that to a 2-year-old because he's not ready. What about a 4-year-old? Structured sports activities for preschoolers often create frustration because the kids are typically unable to do what we're asking. The fun and joy go out of it. Unfortunately, there's the occasional child who can swing a tennis racket or actually dribble a soccer ball at age 3 or 4—but those children are the exception. When we compare our kids to the exception instead of what's truly the norm, we set ourselves and our children up for frustration. We also hinder their development.

"By making children dependent on others to schedule and entertain them, we deprive them of the pleasures of creating their own games and the sense of mastery and independence they will need to enjoy running their own lives," write Kathey Hirsh-Pasek and Robert Michnick Golinkoff in *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*.

Kids who are overscheduled and pushed too hard get bored when no one is telling them what to do, because they have

literally been deprived of the opportunity to learn how to think creatively. Still, it's hard to swim against the tide.

"Parents who don't want to participate in all of the accelerated opportunities and activities for their children often feel anxiety in this new child-rearing climate. As parenting itself becomes more competitive, many moms and dads worry that their children could be left behind if they don't take advantage of every available opportunity," write Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff.

But not giving children time to rest and just chill out will hurt them in the long run. Children need down time, and it should not include electronic stimulation. Video games get the adrenaline pumping and are not truly relaxing.

"It's ironic, but if you push kids too fast, too early, and too hard, it has a negative effect on [them]," says Aaron Welch, a mental health counselor based in Orlando, Florida, who works with children and adolescents. "We're seeing anxiety...in younger and younger kids. I have 6- and 7-year-olds in my office saying, 'I can't do anything right.'"

Welch blames the anxiety on parental "unrealistic expectations," but only in part. "They're over stimulated, in part by activities, but also by video and computer games. Those games put you in a constant state of stress because they are so competitive."

Welch suggests spending 20 to 30 minutes a day playing with your child, letting them lead. Get on the floor, let your child decide what to play, and do it with them, whether it's building with blocks or pretending with dolls. "This helps you bond with your child, gets them using their imagination; and it's relaxing," Welch says. "That bonding will also help you with discipline. The more connected you are to your child, the more they're going to listen to you. The bonds you create with your preschooler affect the way you'll relate when that child is 16."

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AVOID THE COMPETITION TRAP

BY KERI WYATT KENT

1. Decide ahead of time to limit the number of activities you sign your kids up for so you have time to just relax and enjoy your children. Don't wait until you're faced with peer pressure: Set limits, such as one sport per season per child, before you are faced with the decision.
2. Live in the moment: Don't worry about whether your child will get a college scholarship; enjoy playing catch (without pressuring or yelling) in the backyard. Be active with your children, rather than signing them up for activities.
3. Don't compare your child to others. God made each of us unique. Tell your children that you love them and you think they are wonderful. Be specific about what you like about them. When a friend tells you about her child's accomplishments, do you feel compelled to respond with something a little better? Remember that your child's accomplishments are just that—your *child's*, not yours.
4. Don't pressure your child to learn with flashcards or videos. Rather, cuddle them on your lap and read to them as they look at the pictures. Also, spend time yourself reading. Your child is likely not only to read sooner, but more importantly, to see reading as something enjoyable.
5. Pay attention: Is your child sick a lot? Stress lowers immunity and also causes headaches and stomachaches. Children who cry a lot or act out in anger are sometimes trying to deal with the frustration of being pushed too hard.
6. Pray for your child. Resist the urge to pray that they would accomplish more. Rather, focus on being grateful for your children as they are. God loves you because of who you are, not what you do. Ask for God's help in loving your children in that same way.

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READ MY QUIPS

HUH?

You amateur grammarians will love these dangling participles and misplaced modifiers:

Newspaper Headlines

- NINE DAYS AFTER DEATH, NIXON APPLAUDS SINGER
- SATELLITE TRACKS COWS FROM OUTER SPACE
- TEEN IS STRUCK BY CAR TRYING TO CATCH BALL
- DEER INTERFERING WITH JETS BEING SHOT AT PHILLY AIRPORT
- TICK-BORNE ILLNESS KNOWN TO AFFECT DOGS FOUND IN HUMANS

Newspaper Articles

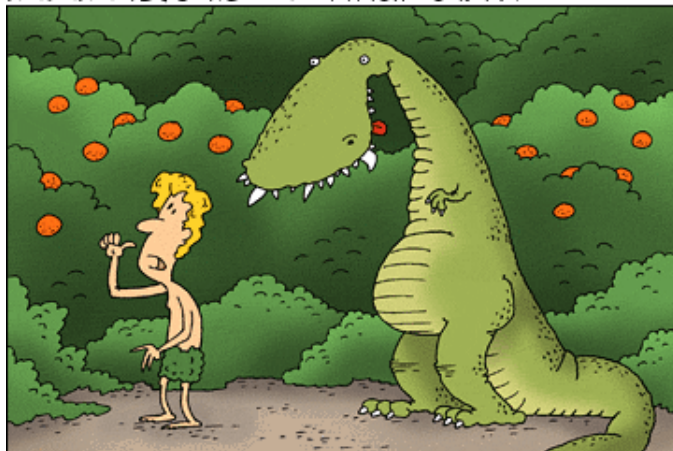
- The cause of the blaze was determined to be arson by Sheriff Detective Ronald Walker.
- They delivered 66 food packages to the elderly residents living locally in a large box.
- The cause of death was determined to be strangulation by the medical examiner.
- I whispered a suggestion that we take a walk into her ear.
- This is Red Ribbon Week. Students are asked to pledge to be drug free this week at lunch.
- You can see many exquisite statues walking around the museum.
- The bride was given in marriage by her father, wearing her mother's wedding gown.
- We saw lots of squirrels going to and from church.

Classified Ads

- FOR SALE: A cross-cut saw by a Lyndon man with newly sharpened teeth.
- LOST: A walking stick by an elderly man with a curiously carved ivory head.

From The Bride of Anguished English by Richard Lederer (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 161-164.

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I WANT TO GO AHEAD AND CHANGE THE NAME I SET FOR 'AAAAAAAAAYAAAAA' TO 'T-REX'

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