

For most parents  
there's not enough  
time in the day.  
Here's how to  
break out of the  
harried family trap.

A R E Y O U  
timelocked?

B Y R A L P H K E Y E S

IN PLANO, TEXAS, AN AFFLUENT COMMUNITY north of Dallas, stress counselor Leslie Kolkmeier sees an increasing number of time-pressured children. She tells of one youngster who was often absent from school due to headaches. The child's main source of anxiety seemed to be the clock. "If I'm not ready to go with the keys in my hand by three minutes after eight," explained the child's mother, "my little girl gets sick."

Parents seldom want to teach their children to feel pressed for time. But given our own crowded schedules, rushing is the only model many children have to emulate. When automobile traffic grows so congested it can no longer move, it's said to be gridlocked. Today, many American families are "timelocked." Claims on our time, as well as our children's, have grown so demanding that sometimes it seems impossible to wring another second out of our calendars. We tend to think, "There aren't enough hours in the day."

Families bear the brunt of a national sense of

timelock. Home once was a refuge from the time-bound atmosphere of the office or factory. Now the tempo of the workplace, along with much of its paraphernalia—datebooks, phone systems, PCs, faxes—have invaded our homes, and we run the risk of raising children who are little clones of our timelocked selves.

Some of my least favorite moments as a parent come on those too frequent mornings when my wife and I must urge our two young sons, David and Scott, to step it up or we'll all be late. "Get a move on. We haven't got all day!" I'll say. This pressure makes us edgy and unhappy. When there's time to dawdle, we're happier: Scott, who's three years old, will linger at the table and "read" cereal boxes or look for birds out the window. David, age ten, can take his time choosing his wardrobe for the day.

Kids and parents alike have intensely mixed feelings about the busyness of our lives. We parents remember fondly our own childhoods, which were more leisurely and less

Adapted from the book *Timelock: How Life Got So Hectic and What You Can Do About It* by Ralph Keyes. Copyright ©1991. Reprinted by arrangement with HarperCollins Publishers.

# Step back from the fray.

organized than our children's. Yet we also seem to accept the notion that activity is more valuable than inactivity. One reason that we do is "aspiration inflation." As a mother of two young children in Crystal River, Florida, told me, "I sometimes feel like I'm a bad mother unless my kids are involved in many types of activities."

A second reason we overschedule our kids' lives is that we ourselves are busy and are genuinely concerned for our children's welfare—we need to know that our children are safe when we're not at home.

There is a third reason that parents favor busyness. Often we worry that, given free time, our children will simply turn on the TV or play video games. We overlook the possibility that a child may as readily want to draw a picture, be read to, or help us on our errands. We may forget that children need time for daydreaming, fantasy, and introspection—all part of the foundation of a child's creative development.

And there's the rub: We do pay a price for putting ourselves and our children on tight schedules. It takes the form of frustrated parents and kids who have internalized time pressures.

Perhaps the most poignant problem we parents face is a lack of time to spend with our children. It's easy to tell if you have this difficulty. Just ask yourself how often you say:

"Not now."

"Some other time."

# Take off your watch.

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

Experts suggest that we can deal with our busyness by reserving "quality time." Quality time certainly helps, but the notion implies that something is being *accomplished* during short, intense hits of parenting. Yet some of the most important moments of childhood occur only when the pace slows down and real communication becomes possible.

In this respect, the tactics required for good parenting are the opposite of those recommended for effective time management. The qualities that get us ahead in business or the professional world—efficiency, goal-directedness, the ability to work at a brisk pace—are the antithesis of those called for to be successful parents. The best kind of time spent with children can bear an uncanny resemblance to "wasted" time. A satisfying family life requires a tempo that is radically different from that at work.

Of course, timelocked families can't solve their problems working in a vacuum. Only when the culture begins to encourage more flexible work arrangements will families be able to modify their priorities in any comprehensive way.

In the meantime, parents can take a few modest steps to loosen time's stranglehold on their lives. What we need is a new *attitude* toward time, one that puts the components of our work and family lives in better balance. Keep in mind that time pressures sometimes originate as much from within as from without. By stepping back from the fray and changing—even marginally—our basic approach, we can often gain greater enjoyment of life. Here are a few suggestions:

**Plan life, not time.** Assessing what we really want from life calls for asking ourselves questions we often avoid. There's more to happiness than crossing completed tasks off a to-do list. Take some time to think about what you hope to accomplish overall, as opposed to how much you can get done today.

**Decelerate.** One of the main obstacles to finding time for ourselves is "rushaholism," the urge to fill every spare second with activity. Try to create small breaks. For example:

- Remember that time is uniform only

as measured by clocks; our bodies keep irregular time, based on sunlight, season, mood, and age. Get to know your body's inner clock. Work hardest during peak energy periods and take brief time-outs throughout the day.

- When hurried, ask yourself, "Do I really need to rush? What's the worst that can happen if I don't?" Try to distinguish necessary haste (late for an appointment) from impatience (one-hour photo developing).

- Treat delays as found time rather than as causes of anxiety.

- Try not to do two things at once (for example, talk on the phone while washing dishes). This often adds to stress.

- Whenever possible, choose the slower of two alternatives: Use stairs instead of elevators; walk rather than drive; hand-write a letter instead of typing it.

**Reduce awareness of time.** The fewer reminders we have of measured time, the less it intrudes on our lives. Go watchless whenever you can. Reduce the frequency with which you check the clock.

**Upgrade family time.** Children need time and attention. Try the following:

- Schedule regular family activities, especially meals. If we lose the habit of eating together, we forgo a basic opportunity to connect with the people we love.

- Make sure that your kids are always on your calendar.

- Explore any opportunity to rearrange your work schedule to maximize family time. An increasing number of employers today offer flexible schedules.

- If you can, consider telecommuting or working at home. This is no panacea (your hours may still be long), but you'll have greater flexibility to respond to the changing needs of your family.

The key to timelock is at least partly in our own hands. To restore balance, we have to apply brakes to life's accelerating pace. This won't be easy; for one thing, we may not accomplish everything we hope to. What do we gain in return? Time, the most precious possession of all. ■

*Ralph Keyes has written eight books. He lives with his family in Yellow Springs, Ohio.*

**Turn the page to learn how one family broke out of timelock.**