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Reclaiming childhood in an overscheduled world

A guide for parents, teachers and the community.

"The beginning of something is always very important. Especially when it's young and needs time to grow"(Plato) These words, attributed to Plato, the famous philosopher and educator, remind us that infancy and childhood is a precious and unique time in the life span. The words challenge us to remember that childhood is the beginning phase of life, and that time is needed to nurture, guide and support children as they grow. Childhood is a time for exploring, finding out and learning about yourself and the world. It is a time where sometimes children push the boundaries a little too far or test the limits. It is a time when we give permission to children to not have to be perfect. Often it is a time for trial and error, and hopefully along the way, a time of enjoyment and happiness. Hopefully it is also a time with many opportunities for children to build a positive sense of wellbeing, and acquire skills and abilities to work, play and live alongside others productively. However, we are at a particular place and time in history, which seems in many ways, to be moving away from the notion that childhood is unique. In fact, we seem to be at times spiralling dangerously down the slope of forgetting exactly what the nature of childhood is. Society, in some ways subtly, and in some ways not so subtly, often portrays childhood and children as a watered down or smaller version of an adult. A miniature adult or pseudo teenager seems to be a view held by some in our society. Many adults actually call children 'little adults'. We increasingly seem to dress them and talk with them and expect certain things of them, as if they were already grown up. A view not so dissimilar to this was held in the Middle Ages when children, often depicted in paintings of the time, were dressed like adults, only as a smaller version. *"Medieval art until about the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it."* (Aries, 1973) *The concept of 'childhood' did not exist as it has in the twentieth century. "In the realm of real life, childhood was a period of transition which passed quickly and which was just as quickly forgotten."* (Aries, 1973). As we now find ourselves half-way through the first decade of the 21st century, it is important to revisit childhood, our community's view of childhood and what our children most need. We need to ensure that we do not return to those days where childhood was not regarded as unique.

We all need to share in the responsibility of providing a solid foundation for our young children and to ensure that foundation is based upon realistic and supportive strategies and expectations of young children. I believe one of the greatest gifts we can ever offer our children is in fact to let them be children.

To get all there is out of living, we must employ our time wisely, never being in too much of a hurry to stop and sip life, but never losing our sense of the enormous value of a minute. (Robert Updegraff)

So what's the hurry?

"Today's child has become the unwilling, unintended victim of overwhelming stress – the stress borne of rapid, bewildering social change and constantly rising expectations" (Elkind, 2001) Increasingly, many of us are becoming caught up in a rushed and hurried society. We rush to work, we rush home. We rush our children from activity to activity and we urge them to gain certain reading levels at certain points along the education path. We are in a rush to get everything right, as soon as we can. Everything has sped up and the world around us is moving

at a frighteningly fast speed. It seems the world is rushing too quickly and despite our best intentions, our expectations of children have consequently increased to the extent where our view of childhood has shifted considerably and not necessarily for the better.

- How does the move away from viewing childhood as a unique and special time, manifest itself in practical ways?
- How does this impact on parents and the wider adult community?
- What are some of the factors that have contributed to this view?
- What are the implications for children, parents, teachers and the wider community?

The technological world, for all the great advantages it provides, has contributed in part to the fast pace of today's society. We are accustomed to instant access, instant communication, instant answers and instant responses. The notion of waiting, of time to pass, of enjoying a moment of quiet or personal space, is becoming something of the past. We expect to be given answers and responses at the moment we request them. We expect that things can be fixed the moment we need them to be. Most of us in the Western world no longer have to wait to check messages at home, we all have mobile phones, we can log on to the Internet in coffee shops, we can roam the world in cyberspace, and yet, despite what appears to be the advantages of modern technology, we don't appear to be necessarily happier or wiser or healthier. More importantly, the quicker the world moves ahead of us, the more we are challenged to keep pace or even get one step ahead. The more challenging life seems, the more stressful it often becomes. Our children often become caught up in this frantic pace and sometimes appear to become lost. Australia is now one of the world's hardest working countries, with many of us working longer and longer hours with less and less time for recreation and rest. The predictions of thirty years ago, that Australia would become a country of great leisure and recreation time, with fewer working hours, has proven to be far from the current reality. Society itself is at a stage where we measure success by early achievement, we extol the virtues of people who achieve early in life or at a young age and yet success itself is often misinterpreted. We are working and living in a society that often sends us confused messages about what is important, how to succeed, what success actually is and how to measure it. Even teachers working with children in their first year of school often comment as to the increasing pressures on young children in this beginning period of the school life. "We don't have time to let them play, or to have much free time, we have such a crowded and pushed down curriculum. It's a lot more stressful on the kids and us these days."

The issue of homework seems to have escalated out of all proportion. Cathy Sherry in *The Melbourne Age* (10 March 2001), wrote an article headed, *Homework Ate My Childhood*. In the article, Sherry described nagging a prep aged child for not 'doing her homework' and lamented the fact that instead of yelling at her 6 year-old, they could have been having a lovely time playing out in the backyard together (and how much more learning may have eventuated) and what a valuable time that would have been. Sherry went on to say: "There is nothing original in questioning the emphasis on homework and testing in Australian schools today, but I want to add my voice to the chorus of protest before I am brainwashed by the system. I want to say that I don't like the current school culture of relentless academic achievement. When I look at my daughter's homework, I feel sad that so many hours of her time (and mine) will be wasted over the next ten years. Hours that she would otherwise spend dancing with her sisters, building homes for her caterpillars or writing with her sparkly pens. Activities that will develop her mind and which she only has a limited amount of time - her childhood - to do." The issues of homework and what it means, its purpose and level of importance, are issues that cause great controversy in education among teachers and parents.

Over-scheduling

We also receive many messages from our community that say, to be successful, to be the best, we must start earlier and earlier, we must get our children ready earlier, we must ensure that we provide children with everything we possibly can before they even start school. In the United States, a term has been given to this notion of providing every opportunity to children. The term is the over-scheduled child and includes children, even as young as 3 years of age, being taken to a gym lesson, a swimming lesson, a music class and preschool or child care in the same week.

Many of these extra curricula activities are advertised in such a way that it sounds as if somehow children will be missing out on the chance of skill of a lifetime if they do not attend all of these programs in their early childhood. Parents often report feeling guilty if they resist some of this hard sell, or they worry that perhaps other children will have the extra edge on their children if other children have attended particular programs their children have not. Some children are participating in up to three, four or more extra curricular activities a week and often arrive at preschool or school exhausted. Many teachers frequently comment that some children have no 'down time' any more. These children are so busy doing; they have less and less time for being a child.

It is myth, not fact, that in providing the best start and opportunity for our children they need to have accomplished everything and done everything that is on offer before they reach 5 years of age. Whilst there is nothing wrong with participating in extra curricular activities, scheduling children into two or more of these a week, particularly in their preschool years, is often inappropriate. Children can often become tired, burnt out and disengaged. Children who are over-scheduled into weekly activities may inadvertently be learning that life is about having every moment of their lives filled with entertainment and prescribed activities. Consequently, opportunities to show initiative, play alone and/or create experiences for themselves appear (in some cases) to have become lost. Teachers are even reporting that children in their early childhood programs are no longer actually initiating their own creative play. The language of children in these programs is increasingly reflecting "show me how to do this, what do I have to do next?"

Successful life-long learning is about showing initiative, making decisions and choices and thinking laterally and creatively. Parents need to realise they are not failing their children if their young ones are not enrolled in numerous activities each week. Time to play in the backyard or local park, time to create things at home, to entertain oneself, to turn an old cardboard box into a bus or train and to use imagination, is something precious and for some children in our community, in danger of disappearing.

Mixed messages and media pressure

Another recent media and advertising trend is the perpetuation of the notion that it is cool to be grown up and to look like a teenager, even when you are not. Some department stores currently advertise and sell a padded bra for young girls in grades 2 and 3 at primary school. Horrifyingly, a G-string can be bought for 2-year-olds, via the Internet, and some clothing stores. Australian media commentator Phillip Adams, in one of his regular articles in The Australian newspaper, discussed this in an article titled, Paedophilia Inc (June 21 2003). Adams stated, "I'm talking about the billions of dollars of marketing aimed at kids whose childhoods are being cynically abbreviated, stolen for profit. I'm talking about the sexualisation of ever-younger children through advertising and for what passes for entertainment - so that kids are encouraged to see themselves as sexual beings, long before puberty. The use of young 13 and 14-year-old girls as high fashion models in glossy magazines. A child should be allowed to be a child for as long as possible." The media image of representing a child as a teenager, or dressing young pubescent children as sexual models to advertise clothes, pushes us further and further away from the notion that childhood is a specific and important period in the lifespan.

We need to be careful when a society starts to blur the edges between what is appropriate for an adult (who is able to make informed choices about their image and lifestyle) and a child, who is in no position to make such decisions. We also need to be careful that as we oppose issues such as paedophilia, we do not paradoxically begin to condone young children being viewed in any way as an adult, by allowing sexually inappropriate clothing to be provided for children.

Product advertising and marketing also appears to blur the line between childhood and adulthood. Recently in a parent magazine, an advertisement showed an exercise bike that was marketed for children as young as 4 years of age. The advertisement included a list of the bike's features including a calorie counter. Why would a 4-year-old need a calorie counter? Surely, with

the increase in anorexia and eating disorders, and the continued messages to young girls and women about weight and body image being tied to success or desirability, we need to be careful not to buy into that message for young children. Young children do not need to be given a message of 'watch your weight', using a calorie counter on an exercise bike! The community should instead be providing a message of healthy eating and exercise. It is not appropriate for a young child to be counting calories. There are other disturbing or confused messages within our community regarding childhood and learning. Many programs advertise quite blatantly that their gym, music or maths program will provide an extra edge for children, will have them ahead of others and set them up for later learning. It is true that a music, swimming or gym class can be an enjoyable and productive experience for a young child. It can also be a time when the parents and the child can learn or experience something together. However, it is not true that all children will be ready, or that all children will benefit, or that all children have to be ahead of everyone else. Many of the skills found in a gym program, for example, can be acquired and practised by the family going to a local park once a week, enjoying the environment and spending time together.

Many parents feel pressured into spending money they can't afford on programs that are not necessarily going to make a significant difference to the child's learning or later life experiences. It is important for parents not to feel pressured to enrol their children into everything on offer. It is equally important not to feel guilty or pressured by others, or by advertising that appears to suggest that you will be letting your child down if they don't participate or attend.

Damaging labels and inappropriate expectations

As society starts to blur the edges between childhood and adulthood, we find that inappropriate expectations and inappropriate and damaging labels are often placed on young children. It is frightening, for example, to hear the label ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) being applied so often. It is unlikely that the high numbers of children, mostly young boys, being given that label actually have the clinical criteria that matches the types of hyperactive conditions. The label ADHD is often given to a young toddler who is simply displaying what we might have once labelled typical behaviours for a young child or who may once have been called highly active. Labels in themselves can be damaging and often perpetuate a set of beliefs about the child, either in the child or in those adults who parent or teach them. It is as if we as a society are forgetting what might be 'normal' behaviours in young children. We seem to be becoming more judgemental and very quick to label children's behaviours before we have even stopped to consider our own, or the expectations we have placed on children.

The label ADHD is often something that can be uppermost in people's minds before they think more deeply about the context, stage of development or other factors that may be impacting on a child's behaviour. An example is a distressed call I received from a young Mum when working at the university a couple of years ago. She shared this story:

"I have a 2-year-old son and we think he may have ADHD. We celebrated our third wedding anniversary the other evening and my partner and I went out to a very expensive romantic restaurant. At the last minute we decided (as a special treat) to take our son with us. Before we left we explained that he would have to sit quietly for quite a long time and how lucky he was to be going with us. When we got there, he sat quietly but only for about five minutes. Then he started to fiddle with things, be noisy and wanting to run around the restaurant. We are very worried that he wouldn't do what we asked him to do and therefore think he may have something wrong with him, like ADHD."

Criticism is not warranted in this example, as I applaud the intention of the family to share something special together. However, at the age of 2 years, a child is in one of the most energetic stages of life, and cannot really either understand the issue of going to an expensive restaurant, or have the ability to concentrate and sit still for a long period of time. Therefore, it may not have been an issue of something being wrong with the child, and certainly highly unlikely that his behaviour was due to ADHD. Rather, it is most likely that the expectations of the parents for their son's age and stage were inappropriate.

While I am not debating that ADHD and its various forms exist, I believe we have become a society where ADHD is increasingly being considered first in making a diagnosis. It is often the quickest and easiest label to attach and two important factors that sit alongside a label of ADHD are forgotten. Firstly, there is the message to the child that something is very wrong with them and this can often become a self-fulfilling cycle for the child. Secondly, medical professionals often prescribe and administer very powerful drugs to these children. One of the associated subtle messages we may inadvertently be giving to the child is when there is something wrong with you, or you don't feel so good or feel out of control, you take medication. This too is paradoxical when you consider that society spends thousands of dollars on drug and alcohol education in schools and the wider community, attempting to give people the message that you don't actually necessarily have to take some form of drug to feel better or perform well or control behaviour. The Age (May 6 2002), reported in an article titled 'Drugs for Children, US style on the rise in 2002', 'Australian doctors are following US trends by prescribing an increasing range of mood-altering and behaviour-controlling drugs to children...medications for aggression, anxiety and sleep disorders are being given to children younger than 3 years.... Little was known about the long term effects of some of the drugs on children.' In their efforts to support their children, parents also become caught up in inappropriate expectations, believing that their children need to have perfect manners, perfect social skills and interactions, perfect behaviours and perfect literacy and numeracy - all before commencing school.

One example is this anecdote from a parent workshop:

The parent complains that his young 18-month-old daughter won't listen and respond to him when he tells her to stop pulling out the CDs from the bottom shelf in the living room.

The workshop facilitator suggests that perhaps he could move the CDs to a higher shelf, as a child of 18 months is too young to understand consequences. The parent responds with, "I am just trying to train my young daughter to know the difference between right and wrong."

The point in this example is that the parent is well meaning and has good intentions. However, inappropriate expectations of the child's stage and age of development, along with a belief that learning appropriate behaviours is all about 'training', are the pitfalls this parent is likely to fall into. Raising young children is about

- nurturing, not training
- encouraging, not controlling or forcing
- modelling and setting appropriate limits; and
- rules at times in a child's life when they are ready and mature enough to understand them

As frustrating (and at times embarrassing) as it may sometimes be, children will often display behaviours we would rather they didn't. A young child will tend to have a tantrum when it's least needed (usually in a public place that is embarrassing for all!) and will learn to say 'no' (until we feel like we could scream). But children are not born evil or bad. This is an important point, although it sounds as if I'm stating the obvious. While some personalities may be more intense or laid back, children are born with a capacity to learn appropriate behaviours through modeling and appropriate reinforcing. They are definitely not born 'evil'. The tendency to believe that some children are born 'bad' seems to be subtly creeping into society's view more and more. Watching some parents at a play group of new mothers/fathers and listening to conversations such as, "she really tries to manipulate me", of a child who is not yet 2 years of age, suggests that a young child's brain is much more scheming, planning and conniving than it is actually capable of being. We do need to guide our children into using and displaying appropriate behaviours. We do need them to learn about consequences, and living so that all people may live happily and safely together.

Bullying behaviours

I have noticed how often the topic of bullying arises and how popular it has become as a subject for talks to parent and school groups. We need to be very careful with the term 'bullying' and what it means. While bullying behaviours are important to understand, and efforts need to be made in order to change them (as much for the child described as the bully as for those who are bullied), the term itself is often misused and often over-used. Sometimes, children may use bossy

behaviour or try to control the play or interactions with others. This is, in part, the way some children practise how far certain behaviours can be taken. This behaviour does not necessarily translate into the term bully nor should the behaviour be judged as the child being aggressive. It is true that certain behaviours reflect bullying and intimidation of others and cannot be condoned. But sometimes behaviours are part of trying out social rules or attempting to exert more authority than may be acceptable. Adults need to be careful not to use the term bully to describe all behaviours that may be socially unacceptable. One term alone, such as bully, may in fact impede our ability to tackle the specific problem or resolve the issue that needs resolving. Trying to describe and interpret the behaviour, and attempting to understand the motivations of behaviours, is a more productive means of helping a child to change and modify any behaviours that are causing hurt to themselves or others.

Valuing children

Children are all born with an ability to respond and learn and to develop to their own capacity or potential. Given that children are individuals, all children require time, patience, consistency and nurturing as they develop. Children need to be allowed to have a childhood, without the pressures of performing, conforming and being scheduled into a life filled with inappropriate expectations. Our challenge is not to become caught up in a rushed and hurried world, and certainly not to allow our children to be swept along in its manic course.

Creating a world for children that treasures childhood and what it means to be a child, is something our Western world seems to have moved away from. Often with the best of intentions, in wanting only what is best for our children, we have shifted significantly from valuing children's imaginations, playtime, creativity, exploration and time at home or the park with family and friends. Often the sophisticated or intellectual sounding programs now available to children, move us further away from valuing the time we can spend with children and the time they can spend discovering and playing themselves. "Adult society is highly competitive but children's development is a process, not a race. Children mature faster if parents let them take their own time, and further if parents broaden and share their experiences rather than pushing them down an achievement track." (Penelope Leach, 1994).

- Giving children time to grow, to learn and to experience life in a non-rushed and relaxed environment is an important foundation for future learning.
- Enrolling children into too many extra curricula experiences each week often leads to over-tired, stressed children, who cease to benefit from anything.
- Ensuring that messages through the media and advertising portray children in non-sexualised ways helps to value the stage of childhood, and limits inappropriate messages to children and adults about childhood.
- Avoiding labels and not being too quick to judge behaviours that can be attributed to conditions such as ADHD, helps to view the child's behaviours within a context, and provides strategies to work productively with the child.
- Providing a balance of time at home, to play and to enjoy spending time with family members, is extremely valuable for children in their early years of life.
- Value childhood as a unique, specific and special time in the lifespan. Not being in too much of a rush to have children grow up is an important challenge for the community to embrace.