

## On choosing “heart” over “hurry”

Matthew experiences this typical week day: His mother drops him at daycare at 7:30 a.m. where he spends 45 minutes before the bus picks him up for school. After a 30 minute bus ride, he arrives at school where he’s in a class with 32 other children. After school, he rides a bus back to day care where he has a snack, plays, and waits for his father to pick him up. They arrive home, eat supper quickly and head to soccer practice. They get home about 8:00 p.m., do 30 minutes of homework, take a bath, and fall into bed to get a little sleep before starting the whole thing over tomorrow.

Matthew is only six years old.

We recently talked about Matthew’s schedule as his parents were sharing that he’s having trouble focusing on his work at school. He’s “generally cranky” and his teacher has suggested he may have an attention disorder because he seems unable to engage in school work.

And while they’re proud of his leadership on the soccer team, I can’t help but notice that Mom and Dad are looking a little stressed out, too.

How did covered calendars become a status symbol? Even our children are not immune. Parents talk about their children’s lessons, classes, teams (and championships!). You don’t hear many parents brag about how many evenings they manage to be home, how many hours of sleep their family gets, or how much “down time” they manage to find.

Children face a cost in every setting. They must be “hypervigilant,” wondering: What’s expected of me here? Can I please everybody? A child who finds herself in many activity settings in one day must use her resources to make sure she’s ok rather than to learn to read or to relax in play. Cognitive growth slows in children who are tired or stressed.

In his classic book, “The Hurried Child,” David Elkind writes that stress in children “often results in the child feeling restless, irritable, and unable to concentrate.” I can’t help but think of the many children (and parents) I know who could be described with those very words.

We are racing and our children are being asked to adopt our level of busy-ness. It’s fascinating to note that the Chinese character for the word “busy” is the combination of the characters for the words “heart” and “killing.”

Many adults have figured out how to be healthy and busy. At six, Matthew hasn’t. By promoting a too-busy schedule his loving parents realized they were limiting his optimal development.

Matthew's parents are figuring out how to accommodate his needs a little better. I'm happy to report that Matthew is spending more time digging in the dirt of his own backyard. His thoughtful parents have chosen "heart" over "hurry."