

Ain't No Cure for the School-Time Blues

By David G. Beighley

This month's article may seem geared only toward lawyers with school-aged children, but it is loaded with great suggestions for managing the myriad demands of family life. I hope you will appreciate and perhaps incorporate these suggestions to help your busy lives function more smoothly.

I know that some of you have "been there and done that," "might get there someday," or have made a clear decision "not to go there at all" regarding having kids. That being said, the aspects of this article that highlight healthy boundaries, the importance of clear communication in relationships, scheduling for an ordered life, and prioritizing intimacy are relevant for everybody. These concepts are especially important for busy professionals like you who are naturally inclined toward problem solving and helping others.

—Martha D. Burkett,
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It's that time again. No surprise—it comes around this time every year. While none of us like to see summer end (unless you're the parent of quintuplets headed to school after a summer of fun and chaos), schools all over the country are opening their doors to receive this year's bounty of willing and unwilling learners. This annual shift significantly impacts everyone in the family—their schedules, priorities, relationships, boundaries, and communication. In this article, we'll examine potential challenges faced by families going through this transition and look at possible cures for the school-time blues.

Scheduling, Transporting, and Good Boundaries

Scheduling becomes a particular challenge as your children get older and become involved in activities ancillary to their primary classes. These include sports (including travel teams); band and orchestra (including marching band, band camp, solo/

ensemble competitions); school clubs like chess, French, National Honor Society...the list goes on and on. And, if your children are anything like mine, having just moved my youngest daughter into her college dorm, there will be no lack of opportunities that can both enhance and interfere with their primary tasks at school: studying, getting decent grades, and preparing to advance to the next level at the end of the year.

Scheduling, transporting, and establishing and maintaining good boundaries is a significant challenge if you are married and have the help of your spouse. If you are a single or part-time parent, this can create even more stress, both for yourself and within the family unit. Below are a few helpful tips for navigating these issues.

Good Communication with All Concerned

At the beginning of the school year, most schools do a good job of providing students with a calendar marking all the important events of the school year, days off, holidays, and often e-mail addresses of staff and teachers. Please note: this information is often provided *to* the student *for* the parent. And that's where things tend to go awry.

How many times have you heard, 10 minutes before bedtime, "Dad, I need \$50 for the band weekend retreat by tomorrow morning," or "Mom, did I tell you I need six dozen cupcakes for my class by the beginning of class tomorrow morning?" A family calendar placed in a central location in the house is an invaluable tool for tracking upcoming events.

While teachers will, on rare occasions, ask students for something at the last minute, they usually provide a written notice giving adequate time for a task to be completed. Where do these phantom notices end up? In the bottom or side pocket of a well-worn backpack under last week's peanut butter sandwich; an iPod with tangled headphones; the latest issue of *Teen Vogue*, *Sports Illustrated*, *People*, or *Motorsports*

magazines; and homework assignments that were completed last week, due three days ago, but not turned in because "I forgot" or "I couldn't find it."

At our home, we had a daily ritual we called "unloading." When the children got home, backpacks were unloaded under the watchful eyes of a "parental unit," child-care provider, or nanny; relevant items were noted; non-essential items were placed where they belonged; and garbage, which tended to make up the majority of gross weight, was tossed. Notices having to do with scheduling of events were immediately placed on the family calendar and a cross-check for conflicts was completed.

Who's On First?

When you have more than one child in school, parents will often be called on to decide whether they are going to play "man-to-man" or "zone" defense. This entails deciding whether one parent will direct and transport one or more children while the other takes on the rest, or if the day's movements will be dictated by the general direction in which the children are going. "I have to take Chloe to Tae Kwan Do over in East Town, which is near Meijer, and I have some shopping to do. Will you take Ari to his piano lesson in West Town, drop Angela off at driver's training, and pick up the dry cleaning while you're in that area?" This is a pretty typical conversation in families with school-aged children and helps the flow of movement within the family.

Good Boundaries Make Good Families

As previously noted, there will be no lack of opportunities for your children. The issue becomes, how much is enough for each child? Does a desired activity match your child's primary area of interest, or does it seem more like a time-consuming whim? Alternatively, it could be the blooming of a new area of interest. Nevertheless, it is the parents' responsibility to make sure the child is not so overloaded with "doing"

that it interferes with “being,” which can lead to stress, agitation, depression, and poor attitude.

In our family, we found it helpful to have a “family mandate” that each child was to be involved in one sporting event (in or out of the school system) and one artistic endeavor of his or her choice during the school year. Anything else was considered extra and required deeper conversation between parent and child.

For several years, my two youngest children belonged to a local fencing academy and trained three to four evenings a week for 2½ hours. They brought their homework with them, much of which was done on the ride to and from practice. When we travelled to weekend tournaments, homework always went along. My son took piano lessons, and my daughter took art classes. While there were other things they wanted to add to their schedules, as a family, we decided that it would not be in their best interests to pursue more than they currently had on their plates. While the discussions were not easy, in the long run, the children were happier and had enough down time to decompress—to *be* rather than *do*. As one therapist told me, “It’s our job as parents to set the boundaries...it’s their job as kids to push up against them. We don’t need to take it personally; we just have to maintain the boundaries.”

Helicopter Parents and Rebellion

A very good rule of thumb in parenting school-aged children is to allow them to demonstrate just how much they are capable of handling on their own. A good way to do this is to give them just enough responsibility until you see them teetering on the edge of frustration, then pull back an inch or two. As Ms. Frizzle on *The Magic School Bus* used to say, “Get messy, make mistakes, have fun.”

Jung taught us that children’s mistakes are simply their path to understanding. It’s difficult to see our children falter, and the easiest thing to do is make their decisions for them or do for them what they should be doing for themselves just because it’s easier for us—and we don’t risk their embarrassment or ours. However, this does little to help them become self-sufficient and independent, and *that* is our primary task as parents. When we hover over them every step of the way to make sure they are doing it right, we risk acts of childish rebel-

lion simply to prove to us that we cannot control them. Unfortunately for everyone concerned, that’s a battle parents will not win, and it will cause certain dysfunction and distress within the family system.

And lastly...

It’s Not All About the Kids

While the world certainly does seem to revolve around the children during the school year, there are two other important systems to which significant attention must be paid: the family system and the marital system.

It probably comes as no surprise to anyone that school-aged children spend the vast majority of their waking hours in school, taking part in school-related activities, and in their bedrooms. For junior- and senior-high students, we can also add being with friends. Less and less time is spent with the family, doing family-type stuff or having conversations that get past the monosyllabic grunting stage. It is even difficult to gather the family around the dinner table for three evening meals a week as a result of the ongoing and ever-changing schedule of events and places to be and go. And this is not only a challenge presented by the children. After working all day and accommodating their children’s needs, many parents want and need alone time.

There are a few things families can do to connect in meaningful ways during the short bursts of time they have together. Leo Buscaglia, author of the book *Love*, remembers a family rule in his Italian home that everyone had to come to the dinner table and be able to discuss one new thing they had learned that day. He admits there was often a mad rush to the encyclopedias (yes, Virginia, there was a time the Internet did not exist) to come up with a bit of information like, “Did you know that the population of LaGonave, Haiti, is 24,652 and the average income is 17 cents per day?”

A weekly 30-minute check-in, usually on Sunday evening, is another good way to gather the family together and see what the others are doing, what’s going on in their lives, and what might need attention. Along with this, you can include the obligatory board game, which might not last long but can provide a few smiles and laughs before everyone scatters for the evening.

Remember that time before kids, when it was just the two of you in the evening, watching a movie together, puttering around

the house, sitting on the deck reading the paper, or discussing what you would name your kids when you had them? Or going to bed early and having S-E-X? You remember that, don’t you...when you could be intimate without a child knocking on the door wanting to know what you were doing and when you would be done? Or waiting until the children fell asleep, at which time it was a race to see if you could actually have sex without falling asleep yourselves?

It is critical that a couple, whether it be parents, stepparents, or significant others, build in time for themselves during the week and weekends. This must be a boundary; the couple must treat it as sacred time and the children as mom-and-dad time (i.e., unless someone is bleeding, we probably shouldn’t interrupt them). Leaving the kids with a babysitter or having the oldest babysit (with the appropriate compensation, of course) is a way to get out of the house where you won’t be distracted by everything you should be doing. When our children were young, we would hire a babysitter to come after school, and we would retreat to the master bedroom for the evening. The instructions to the sitter were, “Feed them, bathe them, play with them, make sure the homework is done, put them to bed, turn out the lights, and lock up as you leave...but DO NOT DISTURB US UNLESS THERE IS THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR!” The bottom line is that if you don’t dedicate time to coupleship, it won’t be long before the couple disappears into a state of apathy, depression, and hopelessness.

School is in, and the next nine months will be a whirlwind of activity that can, at times, seem overwhelming. Take it 24 hours at a time, set good boundaries, don’t forget to communicate, empty those backpacks... and love each other. Remember, summer will return next year. ■



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