

# The Problem of Time

The problem of time. If you are a parent of even one child, you know what “the problem of time” means. If you have more than one child, then just multiply the problem, right? The problem of time is that there simply is not enough for all that has to be done in any given day. Parents in our present culture are expected to do the impossible. For starters, we are all supposed to work, usually full-time, because it is difficult to make it financially these days on one income. Of course if you are a single parent, you are trying to do just that, and some single parents work two jobs. If you are married, most couples find that they each need to work to meet the necessary expenses not to mention any additional financial goals like creating a savings account, paying down debts, buying additional things for the house, creating a college fund, and the list goes on. There are some families that can get along on one income if the income is large enough, but those are fewer and far between than they used to be. The average family requires both parents to work.

Working outside of the home is only one constraint on time. There are numerous others, one of which is taking care of the home. We need to keep things clean, do laundry, cook, grocery shop, take care of the yard, make schedules, run errands, not to mention bigger tasks that often fall to the bottom of the list because who has time – cleaning out the gutters, pressure washing the house and driveway, repairs, cleaning out the garage, and on and on we go. If you live in an apartment, you are relieved of some of those tasks, but you still spend some portion of time on daily household upkeep, and this is on top of working.

Then there are the kids. The thing about kids is that they “eat” time. Just getting them to get dressed, brush their teeth, get to the breakfast table and out the door to school is a monumental undertaking, and all of this is done before you even step onto your job site. It all starts over again when

you pick them up and come home after work. There is dinner, homework, and baths. If there were problems at school or during the day, you have to deal with them. If there are problems between the kids, you have to settle the disputes. Tag – you’re it! Let’s hope your health is intact and you have plenty of energy, because it is difficult to pull off, even for two.

So far I’ve been talking about the problem of time from the parent’s point of view, and I’m sure most of you can relate quite well to the problem. I would imagine many of you have discovered ways to minimize some of the difficulties and have organized your lives in such a way that you can pull it off, but I am fairly certain that all of us struggle somewhat if not a great deal with all of these responsibilities that need to be taken care of in a day’s time.

So what about the kids? How are they dealing with the problem of time and what kinds of effects are they feeling from our rather frenetic lives? There are many, but I want to focus on the emotional aspects of the effects and how they show up. Let me go through these effects one at a time.

### **Disconnection and Isolation**

When parents are extremely busy, and especially if they are feeling overwhelmed, depressed, anxious or sad, children feel a sense of loss. They experience the parent as being absent or emotionally unavailable, and for the most part, that is true. You know that you love your kids, but when you are emotionally “taken up” by other stronger emotions, especially those that tend to bind you up like anxiety or depression, you are emotionally unavailable as long as those emotional states are present. Even if you are simply involved in the ongoing stress of thinking about and attending to your “list” of things to be done, you are not really available to anyone else at those times. You can switch gears more easily if you are working out in your mind how to get things done as opposed to being highly anxious or depressed, but nevertheless, the felt effect for the kids is that you are taken up – you aren’t really there. They feel disconnected from you. They can also

feel emotionally abandoned and consequently can feel isolated and/or rejected. Because children are still quite egocentric, meaning that they see the world mostly from the point of view of how it affects them, they tend to personalize this disconnection and see themselves as undeserving, unloved, unimportant or all of the above.

Children usually let us know when this has happened, although we may not always understand the signals. Some children react with regressive behaviors. They become whiny, clingy, more demanding, and more emotional than usual. If they are feeling really disconnected, they might act like they can't do things that they have already accomplished previously. For example, your 6 year old who was getting herself dressed in the morning now acts like she can't put on her own clothes, choose her socks, or tie her shoes. She becomes difficult in the morning and wants you to help her get dressed. At bedtime, she cries when you attempt to leave the room after tucking her in and she gets up two, three, four more times after the lights are out, even though she used to go to bed fairly easily as long as you tucked her in. Now she wants endless stories and wants you to lie down with her until she falls asleep.

Actually, this is a common scenario with children who are feeling disconnected from their parents. They have gone all day with feelings of not having you emotionally and their attempts to alleviate these feelings by trying to get your attention have not worked for them. By the time they get to bedtime, they are quite distressed and feel compelled to try and make the connection with you again before the day is over. This is their last shot and they can feel quite anxious about trying to close this emotional gap, so they pull out all the stops to try and get that connection back before drifting off to sleep.

Some children react entirely differently from what I have been describing thus far. They react to the feelings of abandonment with more isolating behaviors. They become aloof and appear not to be affected. They may dive into video games or get on the internet or stare for hours at the TV seemingly absorbed. They may appear visibly depressed or sad, or less interested than usual in activities they normally like. They may also become

unresponsive to what you ask of them and act like they can't remember what it was, or simply as though they didn't hear you. They can be annoyed when you try to talk to them. You might also see an increase in attitude or anger. They become argumentative, difficult and challenging. Everything becomes a struggle. This leads us into a discussion of the second effect which has to do with behavior.

## **Behavior Problems**

It seems that the more stressed we are and the more we have to do, the worse our children's behavior becomes and the more difficult it is to get them under control. There are several reasons why this happens. The first one is related to the feelings of disconnection and abandonment I have described above. Think of it this way: *Children behave and do what we ask of them because they care what we think of them and how we feel about them.* In other words, the stronger and closer the connection we have, the more emotionally attuned we are to them and the more available we are, the more connected they feel and the more likely they are to try and please us. They already know that we love them, and they want to safeguard that special relationship that has been developed. It doesn't mean they won't act out some, but if they feel understood and valued, they are much more likely to try and modify their behavior to please us. Once a child feels really disconnected from us, they become indifferent to our desires. *"If you don't pay attention to me, then I won't pay attention to you."* This is the mindset, although for most kids this not at all conscious. It's reflexive.

The second problem is that our kids are tied into our emotional states and they absorb what goes on around them automatically. If you are stressed out most of the time, depressed, anxious, worried, feeling helpless and so on, then guess what? You will see these feelings reflected back to you in your kids. This is probably one of the more difficult aspects of being a parent. Whatever goes on with you affects your children in a significant way. They don't have the emotional skills to separate themselves from you and see your emotional states as separate from theirs. They can't help but soak

them up. If you are stressed, they are stressed. The more stress they feel, the more insecure they feel which is what leads them toward regressive behaviors.

### **Increased Anger or Irritability**

When we don't get what we need, sometimes our reaction is more one of anger, irritability or agitation as opposed to outright depression or sadness. I've already mentioned above that kids can become much more argumentative when they feel deprived of your time and attention. Some in fact become outright angry and combative if the situation goes on long enough without any recognition or intervention. If you have more than one child, you may see an increase in fighting between siblings. You might also get word from school that your child is acting out and getting into conflicts with other children more than usual. In extreme cases, he can become aggressive toward other kids.

Anger is often the other side of depression and loss. It's a defense of sorts in that it temporarily provides a sense of power over the feelings of helplessness. Actually, anger is a normal phase in the process of loss, but it is not really an effective defense for a child who is feeling disconnected or emotionally neglected. For children, it is more of a signal that we need to recognize so that we can intervene and correct the situation.

The truth is, children will extract the attention they need one way or the other. If they don't get it through consistent channels of love, nurturing, positive attention and concern, they will bring it around through aggression, regression, negative patterns of behavior or detachment. For the most part, these reactive behaviors are just that – they are reactions that are not played out with any intent. They are almost automatic. Our kids are not trying to make our lives miserable. They are not consciously seeking revenge. They are expressing their distress the only way they know how. It is up to us as parents to see this, empathize with them, and take the proper steps to correct the problem.