

Dear Friends,

I know many of you share my concern about the stability of the family. The definition of marriage is under assault, our children are being exposed to depictions of immorality day after day, and people appear to be less committed to the Christian faith. I have addressed some of these cultural changes in my recent letters. But this month, I want to talk about what I consider to be the most serious aspect of family life now on the scene. It is the breathless pace of life at which we run. Fatigue and time pressure are not new to us, of course, but they are steadily worsening. We continue to move faster and faster with the passage of time.

May I share with you what I wrote about this phenomenon in *Bringing Up Boys*? Perhaps this description will hit somewhere near where you live.

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*Our focus has been on the ways boys differ from their sisters and the particular needs that are associated with masculinity. We have also considered the burgeoning crisis that confronts our boys in today's cultural context. Working against them, by way of summary, are the breakup of families, the absence or disengagement of dads, the consequent wounding of spirits, the feminist attack on masculinity, and the postmodern culture that is twisting and warping so many of our children. If there is a common theme that connects each of these sources of difficulty, it is the frantic pace of living that has left too little time or energy for the children who look to us for the fulfillment of every need.*

*Let me elaborate on that point. The trouble we are having with our children, both boys and girls, is linked directly to parental over-commitment, physical and mental exhaustion, and the isolation and detachment they produce. America's love affair with materialism has taken its toll on the things that matter most. Let's go back, as a case in point, to the epidemic of bullying and taunting that is occurring in our schools. All of us experienced similar difficult moments when we were young. So what is different now? It is the absence of parents, who have nothing left to give. Some of us as kids came home to intact and caring families that were able to "talk us down" from the precipice, to assure us of their love, and to help put things in perspective. Someone was there who clearly cared and who told us that the harsh judgment of our peers was not the end of the world. In the absence of that kind of wise counsel in times of crisis, such as my dad provided for me when I came home battered from school, today's kids have nowhere to go with their rage. Some resort to drugs or alcohol, some withdraw into isolation, and some, sadly, vent their anger in murderous assault. If only Mom and Dad had been there when the passions peaked. So many of the difficulties that confront our kids come down to that single characteristic of today's families: There is nobody home.*

*As we have seen, it is boys who typically suffer most from the absence of parental care. Why? Because they are more likely to get off course when they are not guided and supervised carefully. They are inherently more volatile and less stable emotionally. They flounder in chaotic, unsupervised, and undisciplined circumstances. Boys are like fast-moving automobiles that need a driver at the steering wheel every moment of the journey, gently turning a half inch here and a quarter inch there. They will need this guidance for at least sixteen or eighteen years, or even longer. When left to their own devices, they tend to drift toward the center divider or into the ditch, toward misbehavior or danger. Yet 59 percent of today's kids come home to an empty house after school each day. It is an*

*invitation to disaster for rambunctious males, and the older they get, the more opportunities they have to get into trouble. Today, when the culture is in a tug-of-war with families for control of our children, we can't afford to be preoccupied with things of lesser consequence.*

*Your task as a mother or father is to build a man out of the raw materials available implicitly in your delightful little boy. Construct him stone upon stone and precept upon precept. Never assume for a moment that you can go off and "do your own thing" without serious consequences for him and his sister. It is my conviction that those who choose to bring a child into the world must give that boy or girl highest priority for a period of time. It will not always be required of moms and dads. Before they know it, that youngster will become a young man, who will pack his bags and take his first halting steps into the adult world. Then it will be their turn. By all expectations, you as a parent should have decades of health and vigor left to invest in whatever God calls you to do. But for now, there is a higher calling. I feel obligated to tell you this, whether my words are popular or not. Raising children who have been loaned to us for a brief moment outranks every other responsibility. Besides, living by that priority when kids are small will produce the greatest rewards at maturity.*

*I am convinced that most contemporary mothers care more about their husbands and their children than about any other aspect of their lives, and they would like nothing better than to devote their primary energies to them. But they are trapped in a chaotic and demanding world that threatens constantly to overwhelm them. Many of these young women also grew up in busy, dysfunctional, career-oriented households, and they want something better for their kids. Yet, the financial pressures and the expectations of others keep them on a treadmill that leaves them exhausted and harried.*

*I have never written this before, and I will be criticized for saying so now, but I believe the two-career family during the child-rearing years creates a level of stress that is tearing people apart. And it often deprives children of something that they will search for the rest of their lives.*

*My prayer is that a scale-back from a lifestyle of constant time-pressures will someday occur. If it ever becomes a movement, it will portend wonderfully for the family. It should result in fewer divorces and more domestic harmony. Children will regain the status they deserve and their welfare will be enhanced on a thousand fronts. We haven't begun to approach these goals yet, but we can only hope that a significant segment of the population will awaken someday from the nightmare of over commitment and say, "This is a crazy way to live. There has to be a better way than this to raise our kids. We will make the financial sacrifices necessary to slow the pace of living."*

*It is not enough simply to be at home and available to our children, however. We must use the opportunities of these few short years to teach them our values and beliefs. Millions of young people who have grown up in the relative opulence of North America have not had that training. They are terribly confused about transcendent values. We have given them more material blessings than any generation in history. They have had opportunities never dreamed of by their ancestors. Most have never heard the pounding of artillery shells or the explosion of grenades. More money has been spent on their education, medical care, entertainment, and travel than any who have gone before. Yet we have failed them in the most important of all parental responsibilities: We have not taught them who they are as children of God or what they have been placed here to do.*

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Here are some additional comments that appeared in my book, *Hide or Seek*, published in 1974. Clearly, families have been struggling with exhaustion and over-commitment many years.

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*Why do dedicated parents have to be reminded to be sensitive to the needs of their children? Shouldn't this be the natural expression of their love and concern? Yes, it should, but Mom and Dad have some problems of their own. They are pushed to the limits of their endurance by things they feel like they must do. Dad is holding down a demanding job, and he huffs and puffs to keep up with it all. Mom never has a free minute either. Tomorrow night she is having eight guests for dinner, and since she works during the day, she only has one weekend to clean the house, go to the market, arrange the flowers for the centerpiece, and put the hem in the dress she will wear. Her "to do" list is three pages long, and she already has a splitting headache from it all.*

*She pops the kids' supper into the microwave and hopes the troops will stay out of her hair. At about 7 p.m., little Joshua tracks down his perspiring mother and says, "Look what I just drew, Mom." She glances downward and says, "Uh huh," obviously thinking about something else. Ten minutes later Josh asks her to get him some juice. She complies but resents his intrusion. She is behind schedule, and her tension is mounting. Five minutes later he interrupts again, this time wanting her to reach a toy that sits on the top shelf of the closet. She stands looking down at him for a moment, then hurries down the hall to meet his demand, mumbling as she goes. But as she passes his bedroom door, she notices that he has spread his toys all over the floor and made a mess with the glue. Mom explodes. Her screams rattle Josh's teeth.*

*Does this drama sound familiar? "Routine panic" is a way of life. I conducted an inquiry among seventy-five middle-class, married women who were between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age. I asked them to indicate the sources of depression that most often send them into despair and gloom. Many common problems were revealed, including in-law conflicts, financial hardships, difficulties with children, sexual problems, and mood fluctuations associated with the menstrual cycle and physiological distress. But to my surprise, fatigue and time pressure were tagged as the most troublesome sources of depression by half the group; the other half ranked it a close second.*

*It is obvious that many families live on a kind of last-minute emergency schedule, making it impossible to meet the demands of their own over commitments. Why do they do it? The women I surveyed admitted their dislike for the pace they kept, yet it has become a monster that defies containment. Faster and faster they run, jamming more and more activities into their hectic days. Even their vacations are marked by this breakneck pace. If they don't get to St. Louis by Saturday night, they'll lose their reservations.*

*Who is the inevitable loser in this breathless lifestyle? It's the little person who is leaning against the wall with hands stuffed in the pockets of his blue jeans. He misses his father during the long day and tags around after him at night, saying, "Play ball, Dad!" But Dad is pooped. Besides, he has a briefcase full of work to be done. Mom promised to take him to the park this afternoon, but deadlines forced her to work overtime at her job. The child gets the message:*

*The folks are busy again. He rambles into the family room and watches two hours of cartoons and reruns on television.*

*Crowded lives produce fatigue, fatigue produces irritability, and irritability produces indifference. Indifference can be interpreted by the child as a lack of genuine affection and a sense of belonging. Children just don't fit into a "to do" list very well. It takes time to be an effective parent when children are small. It takes time to introduce them to good books. It takes time to fly kites and play ball and put together jigsaw puzzles. It takes time to listen, once more, to the skinned-knee episode and talk about the bird with the broken wing. These are building blocks of family life, held together with the mortar of love. It seldom materializes amidst busy timetables.*

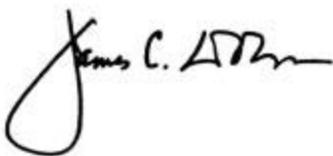
*Slow down, moms and dads! Your children will be gone so quickly, and you will have nothing but blurred memories of those years when they needed you. I'm not suggesting that we invest our entire adult lives in the next generation, nor must everyone become parents. But once those children are here, they had better fit into our schedules somewhere. Children can't raise themselves, and parents who have busy careers must find a way to work their boys and girls into their schedules.*

Well, friends of Family Talk, this is my message to you for October. Thanksgiving and Christmas are right around the corner, which are the busiest times of the year. Perhaps it would be a good idea to pause, take a deep breath, and think again about the relationships that matter most. There might be a better way to run our lives.

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If you can [help us financially](#) at this time, we would appreciate your kindness. May God bless you and your busy family. Let us know if this letter rings a bell at your house. I assure you it certainly echoed in our house.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James C. Dobson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

Founder and President

i: "Unsupervised Teens Do Poorly in School, Want Afterschool Activities, New Survey Finds," U.S.Newswire, 6 March, 2001.