



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Supplement: Slowing the Pace — Calmer Children in a Stressful World

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Introduction

1. Bobbie Eggers reached a time when she no longer had as many friends among her neighbors in Greenwich, CT as she once had. Of course, people often find themselves at odds with neighbors. But the reason in Bobbie's case was different. She and her husband decided that she would work from home and—more importantly—their children would no longer participate in as many activities. They remained active in many things, but dropped figure skating, horseback riding, and hockey.¹ The family found time for meals and board games, together.
2. The Eggers family became part of a growing grassroots revolt.
 - a. "... [M]ore families ... are finding the courage to turn down teams and tournaments, to limit activities to a few favorites so that they rediscover time to be a family."²
 - b. Many talented children gave up sports because adults were draining the fun out of it, the climate had grown too competitive, with no time for free play, and the commitment in nearly every sport was year-round. One young man, whose dad started the local traveling baseball team, stopped playing, "confess[ing] that his commitment to baseball had become a burden."³
3. Change is needed, for, as child psychologist David Elkind warned nearly two decades ago, "The traditional culture of childhood is fast disappearing. In the last two decades alone, according to several studies, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week, and eight of those lost hours were once spent in unstructured play and outdoor games."⁴
4. A significant result, often overlooked because of more obvious symptoms, is the increase in stress among children. Some indicators of the problem include:
 - a. Problems with substance abuse and sexual activity; as we hurry children to adulthood, we expect them to be more mature more quickly (to sample "adult life"); it should not surprise us

¹ Amanda Paulson, "Quick! Is Johnny signed up for daydreaming?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 8, 2004. The citations herein are from the electronic edition, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0908/p01s04-ussc.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Marc Lerner, "Game Over," *Reader's Digest*, October 2004, 147-151.

⁴ David Elkind, "The Reality of Virtual Stress," *CIO Magazine*, Fall/Winter 2003. The citations here are from the electronic edition, <http://www.cio.com/archive/092203/elkind.html>. (In January 2019: this article now appears as, "David Elkind: Technology's Impact on Child Growth and Development," <https://www.cio.com/article/2441936/it-organization/david-elkind--technology-s-impact-on-child-growth-and-development.html>. Accessed January 17, 2019.)

when they need release from the tension and, in their inexperience, look for relief in the wrong places.⁵

- b. The rise in youth and teen suicide.⁶
 - c. Pediatricians noted increases in so-called “stress diseases”—headaches, stomachaches, allergic reactions, etc. Type A behavior was tied to higher cholesterol levels in some children.
5. The problem is not likely to get better soon. Life in our information age continues to increase its hold on us. Elkind wrote, “Children’s sense of time has changed as well. The speed of digital communication allows us to be more productive than ever. Perhaps that is one of the reasons we seem to believe we can accomplish more in the time we have than we did in the past. Young children may not only attend day care or after-school programs, they may also be on two teams in one season such as soccer and T-ball, or gymnastics and another sport. School-age children are burdened with even more commitments and homework starting with the early grades.”⁷
6. Let’s look at this issue more closely and determine what we can do about it.

Body

I. Stress and Stressors.⁸

A. Defining stress.

1. A reaction to what occurs in our lives. Events use up the energy we have. The more events, or the more important they are to us (e.g., taking a child to the emergency room, death of a loved one), the greater the stress.
2. Things that cause stress are not good or bad per se, but are part of the demands on us. The problem, especially for children, comes when we become overloaded with demands.
3. To understand how stress affects us, be aware of the stress response pattern.
 - a) Step one—rapid mobilization of energy reserves; a general alarm is sounded in which adrenalin is pumped into the blood, the heart rate quickens, breathing becomes more rapid, the stomach and intestines stop digesting, blood pressure rises dramatically, and the senses become acutely attuned to every sight and sound.
 - b) Step two—rapid increase of energy consumption.
 - c) Step three — vigorous physical activity (especially useful in primitive times when the choice in the face of stress was “fight” or “flight”).
 - d) Step four — return to normal.
4. Interrupt the pattern at any stage, and stress becomes harmful.

⁵ News reports in Memphis the week of September 26-October 2, 2004 highlighted the problem. A Youth Risk Behavior Study of Memphis city school children was done by the CDC during the period February-December 2003. The survey, as it appeared on the web site of WMC-TV in Memphis, compared Memphis results with four other cities comparable in size and demographics. Comparisons were also made with national and Tennessee responses. Ten major categories and thirty specific areas were covered. Areas of particular concern included behaviors that contributed to violence (including dating violence), alcohol and drug use, sexual behaviors, and suicide.

⁶ In Memphis, 27.4% reported feeling hopeless or sad, 12.5% reported having seriously considered suicide, 10.9% had made a suicide plan, 9.3% had attempted suicide, and 3.3% had required medical attention as the result of an attempt.

⁷ Elkind, “The Reality of Virtual Stress.” In his article, Elkind noted four traits of our culture: it is speed-dominated, a screen culture, an information culture, and a communication culture.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, the information in this section was drawn from David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, 1st Ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981), 141-163. Three revised editions of this book have been released, the most recent a twenty-fifth anniversary edition in 2007. For more information on the issue of how teens are affected by modern society, see Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*. This book has been released in two editions, the most recent of which was completed in 1998.

B. Causes.

1. Some stress is normal and certain things that are always part of life are more stressful than others.⁹
2. Children's stress is rooted in parental stress.
 - a) A throw-away society that demands an ever faster pace leaves adults stressed as never before (one writer compared modern stress levels to those experienced in the Great Depression).
 - (1) American adults are more afraid; the threat of violence is everywhere, and most of us have been touched with it or know someone who has.
 - (2) American adults are more alone. Single-parent homes continue to increase in number. Paradoxically, we live in more urban surroundings, but are more alone.
 - (3) American adults are more insecure. Computers replace laborers, economic problems trouble us, things move too fast.
 - b) Because of a general sense that things are out of control, there is a tendency to try to exercise control in the one place we can. For parents, this appears to be the home.
 - (1) Child-rearing is stressful, so we try to speed children to adulthood.
 - (2) It is natural for stressed people to focus more on themselves. So, when parents are stressed, it is hard to give children proper attention. This adds to our own stress, but also to the stress of our children.
3. Societal pressures also mount up on children.¹⁰
 - a) The focus on early intellectual attainment—getting kids into the right kindergarten, or pressuring them to do certain academic tasks before they are ready to do so (in a developmental sense). Living out our frustrations in them. Some reason, "if my child is precocious, that brings me status."
 - b) The desire to have our kids experience everything. Many do an activity or more before school and one or two after school. Finding balance is difficult, but parents need to control their kids schedule, including church activities.¹¹
 - c) Dress and make-up—media influence helps create pressure for kids to dress like adults. Cosmetic lines for children ages 4-9 have been produced. If they are dressed like adults, it is possible to expect them to act and be mature like adults.
 - d) Recreational changes.
 - (1) The trend to have focused camps for all sorts of activities has added to the problem. David Elkind commented: "The change in the programs of summer camps reflects the new attitude that the years of childhood are not to be frittered

⁹ Elkind, 161-63, discusses and reproduces the Holmes Stress Scale which ranks various life events according to the stress each creates. A parent dying earns 100 points, a parent being fired from a job earns 47, a mother becoming pregnant earns 40, being threatened by violence in school earns 31, and so on. A score under 150 is an average stress load; between 150 and 300, one will show some stress symptoms; a score of 300 or more is likely to see a child experience a serious change in health or behavior.

¹⁰ This material is also taken from Elkind, *Hurried Child*. Although I used the first edition, and there have been some changes and updates, it is striking to see how prescient Elkind was and how relevant this remains, nearly forty years after Elkind first published his book. The articles cited above from *Christian Science Monitor*, *Reader's Digest*, and especially Elkind's article on "Virtual Stress" also show some examples of the same kinds of things, as current in 2004. Suffice it to say, the problem is not lessening in its severity.

¹¹ Some youth ministries apparently fail to take into account that school makes demands on their students. When I taught school, I counseled good teens who were overwhelmed. They reported that part of their load came from trying to be involved in all the multiple activities expected in their youth ministries. They felt guilty if they did not participate in everything. The key is balance—without abandoning the principle of kingdom-first living.

away by engaging in activities merely for fun. Rather, the years are to be used to perfect skills and abilities that are the same as those of adults.”¹²

- (2) Recreational sports programs for youth begin earlier and generally are more intense than they once were; some may thrive, but for many it is a detriment.
 - (3) How much of this is tied to parental need is an issue. One child psychologist observed that there seems to be a correlation between parents who experience the greatest job dissatisfaction and those who push their kids hardest in sports, the point being that many compete through their children.
- e) Media influence.
- (1) The media invariably presents children as precocious, “all grown up” by age 10. This includes the tendency to depict children in sexual situations at younger ages.
 - (2) TV and internet give kids too much information, much of which is too complex for their level of understanding.
 - (3) TV also tends to thrust kids into the adult world before they are ready. Elkind’s observation about the 80’s remains relevant: “... young children are seeing more on television than their grandparents ever saw in a lifetime.... Consequently, even young children seem quite sophisticated about the major issues of our time—drugs, violence, crime, divorce, single parenting, inflation and so on. What they are able to do with this information is quite another matter.... Making experiences more accessible does not make them more comprehensible.”¹³

II. Strategies for Coping.

A. What we cannot do.

1. We cannot change our society. Technology is here to stay. The information glut continues to grow. Society’s pace will remain hurried.
2. Our task therefore is to learn how to manage these things and teach our children to do so.

B. Some steps in the right direction.

1. We must learn to prioritize and sometimes say no based on what is best for the child.
 - a) Elkind tells of seeing toddlers who were barely able to walk on the ski slopes in the most fashionable ski-wear. His questions about that may be applied to all areas of child-rearing: “Is it really necessary to have preschoolers on the slopes? Is it in the child’s best interests? Does it take into account all that we know about the specialness of the identity of children and their developmental needs?”
 - b) As the Eggers family did, choices will need to be made.
2. Let kids be kids. “A childhood is the most basic human right of children.”
3. Learn to live on twenty-fours a day. The past is behind us, the future not yet here. Live each day for that day, and live it fully (Matthew 6:34; Ecclesiastes 9:10; cf James 4:13-17).

III. A Solution for Eternity.

A. We need to understand that the call of Christ extends to a qualitative difference with the world in every part of our lives.

1. The principle is spelled out for us in Romans 12:1, 2 and Colossians 3:1-4 (see 3:18-4:1 for the context of vv 1-4).

¹² Elkind, *Hurried Child*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77.

2. Too often, however, we apply passages like this only to the “big” moral issues; the devil wisely attacks in ways that do not look to be as threatening.
- B. In the interest of eternity, we must understand that the American way of life is not always exactly like the way to which Christ calls us.
 1. Accordingly, we will have to forego some good things in favor of the best things—from an eternal perspective (see Luke 10:38-42).
 2. We should understand, too, that as active Christians, we have schedule demands that many people around us do not have; to seek first the kingdom does not mean total withdrawal from the world, but it will mean that we can’t do everything others do.
 3. Christianity has always challenged societal norms; we must understand what that means for us as a church and respond accordingly.
 4. We should also understand that we cannot do this alone.
 - a) Too often, the rat race and desire to keep up with our neighbors characterizes our churches.
 - b) Would we be willing to have a “no TV week” as one church did, in the interest of recapturing our families? Would we be willing to have a pact, as one church did, that no one in this church will buy his 16-year-old a brand new car?

Conclusion

1. Years ago, Mike Straka wrote a column on the Fox News web site entitled, “Parents, Wake Up and Start Parenting.” He told about the mother of a five-year-old who had tragically choked to death on a piece of rubber glove. She told reporters that her child was blowing the glove up like a balloon and that she had yelled for him to stop. A few minutes later, a piece lodged in his throat and he died. She complained, however, ““because the paramedics took too long to get there.”” Straka wrote: “Apparently, the ambulance took 20 minutes to arrive on the scene. My question: How long did it take for the mother to get up... and take the dangerous ‘toy’ away from her toddler? This was a tragedy that could have been avoided. Wake up parents and start parenting.”¹⁴
2. No doubt, most of us agree with Straka. But how many of us are willing to exert the same effort that mother should have made when it comes to the unhealthy stress that threatens the physical, emotional, mental, and the spiritual well being of our children?

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¹⁴ The archived column now appears as Mike Straka, “Grrr! ... Get Off Your Butt,” <https://www.foxnews.com/story/grrr-get-off-your-butt>, September 21, 2005; updated May 20, 2015. Accessed January 17, 2019.