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“The New Family Trump Card” — Family Time vs. Church Time

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Is “family time” encroaching on “church time?” *Leadership*, a publication in the *Christianity Today* family of magazines, surveyed 490 pastors last year, asking them about church life and family. A major theme — parents are taking their kids to soccer games rather than to church.

The soccer games are only an illustration, of course, but team sports loom larger and larger in the lives of many kids and families, often leaving little time for anything else.

From the *Leadership* report:

The phenomenon of overprogrammed kids in the last decade or so is well documented—to the point of satire. (A recent sitcom showed an alien begging off an invasion of Earth because his kid had “a thing.”) What isn’t so well documented is the effect this legion of extracurricular activities has on church life.

The pastors we surveyed report the overall busyness of families is keeping families away from church. Asked whether people are spending more discretionary time on family activities or church commitments, 76 percent said the scale tipped toward family activities. This contrasts with the perception of 62 percent of respondents that a generation ago, free time was more likely spent on church commitments. The balance has shifted.

More:

Carol Welker, children’s ministry pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, Florida, says the impact has been felt especially in weekday programs.

“We stopped doing Wednesday night programs a couple of years ago after they just fell apart,” she said. “We did a survey to find out why families stopped coming, and several said, ‘That’s the one and only night we have together as a family.’”

The rest of the week, often including Sunday morning, is booked with music lessons and sports events. We even hear of pastors who must choose between preaching the Sunday morning sermon and attending Junior’s Little League playoff game. Lay people are more regularly opting for non-church activities.

In our survey 83 percent of pastors said they are aware of situations where people routinely choose family events over church commitments. The list of reasons people give for missing church events: kids’ activities and weekend trips are cited as most common reasons told to pastors (9 in 10 hear this frequently); grown-up sports such as fishing, football, and NASCAR are next, followed by extended family gatherings (7 in 10 hear these frequently), and a child’s illness (almost 6 in 10 hear this reason on a regular basis).

Are these valid reasons or just excuses? “Mostly excuses” said 22 percent of pastors. “Mostly valid” said 13 percent. “Some of both” said 65 percent.

Asked if family time trumping church time is the bigger problem, 61 percent of pastors said yes; only 3 percent said church time was encroaching on family life for their church members. About a third (36%) thought most church members

have a good balance.

This is a fascinating look into family life in America, even among Christian families. Let's be honest here — these families, for the most part, are not spending these additional hours of the week in joint spiritual activities and disciplines. It is not as though “family time” was a time of biblical instruction and spiritual edification. No . . . increasingly it's Little League and NASCAR.

Here is a part of the article many readers might miss:

Welker says the church isn't helping by segregating families once they arrive on campus. “Shouldn't we as a church try to bring families together?” Welker asks. “Instead what we do is bring them to church and then put mom and dad in this room, the high school kids in that room, and the elementary kids down the hall. It's no wonder families are spending more time doing family things than they are spending at church.”

Holly Allen agrees. She is an intergenerational studies specialist at John Brown University. Despite recent interest in intergenerational church ministries, the trend of the past two or three decades has been toward age-graded ministries and the further stratification of generations. “In the past, spending family time and going to church were the same thing,” Allen said. “Now, family time and church time are not compatible ideas, because families are rarely together when they are at church.”

This is a very important insight. When “church time” is seen as a competitor to “family time,” something is wrong at church. When family members hardly see each other at church activities, the congregation needs to take a quick inventory of its concept of ministry.

At the same time, when Christian parents take their kids to Little League games rather than worship on the Lord's Day, these parents teach their children that team sports are more important than the worship of God.

Every kid has a “thing” going on virtually all the time. That is the condition of life today, it seems. But when that “thing” keeps the child — or the whole family — away from church, we need to name that thing what it is . . . at best a snare, at worst an idol.

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