

## Fighting for the Heart of your Child

This letter was initially written and passed out in 2008 to patient families as I was increasingly concerned **then** over the hyper-scheduled, hyper-competitive lives many families were living and the adverse consequences I was seeing in 9-18 years old of fatigue, feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

Cultural expectations and pressures have convinced parents across our nation that kids can only get into the desired or best colleges with a 4.0+ GPA, that college sports teams now ignore typical public school teams and find their recruits in Select teams and that it is somehow in your child's best interest to keep them continuously entertained with activities and/or electronic devices. Somehow 3 or more sport practices a week and the entire family having to schedule their summer vacation around the Select team's schedule in addition to the sports activities having priority at times even over homework became the NORM. Add to this Honors classes in middle school and dual credit classes in high school and it appears to make sense that you, the parent, are doing this in your child's best interest to try to help them get ahead in life, in order to give them the confidence that they can conquer the demands of life as they get older.

As a pediatrician who routinely incorporates counsel and prayer in my practice, this is what is concerning to me. ***I do not see increased confidence, security or enjoyment of life in my pediatric patients.*** Rather I have seen a 5-10 fold increase in anxiety and fear of inadequacy as this hyper-scheduled lifestyle and hyper-competitive academics has become the norm. I see stressed out kids in elementary school and exhausted middle school students trying to juggle pre-AP classes and highly competitive sports. I see an entire generation growing up who has no idea who they are unconnected to activities or comparison and competition with a peer. Somehow the normal Bell curve in which most students would make B's and a much smaller percentage on each side would make A's and C's is no longer accepted. Average intelligence and a child simply enjoying a sport without intense competition are no longer allowed to exist in our culture.

Last year [2007 then] my alumni magazine from Baylor University had a heart-breaking article about the 5-10 fold increase in mental health services being seen across college campuses, forcing colleges to hire additional psychologists and psychiatrists. The article spoke about the fear, anxiety, fear of failure, sense of inadequacy and increased suicide attempts seen in incoming freshmen and sophomore students. THIS is the result of the hyper-competitive culture and attitudes the Gen Z and now Gen Alpha are being raised in. You see, what is your child to do when they arrive at college [that was the reason early Honors and pre-AP classes were pushed] to find that they are AVERAGE for the first time in their life? *They crumble because WHO they are became defined by how they were performing.* Or how about the many in my practice that managed to excel externally [even as I watched an initially out-going, fun, expressive young kid become increasingly quiet, intense and exhausted] and then blow out a knee at 16 and college sports are out and they have no idea who they are without the sport?

I can not tell you how many over-use injuries I am now seeing routinely in my practice. Recently I saw an 11 year old girl who was on 2 different soccer teams in order to make a better Select team next year in for a visit due to knee pain. She also happened to be at the front end of the pubertal growth spurt which causes additional strain on the joints. When I mentioned the need for absolute rest for 1-2 weeks as well as icing and some initial ibuprofen, Dad mumbled something about a better Select soccer team leading eventually to a better chance for a college scholarship. Not wanting to bring condemnation but no longer able to pretend as a pediatrician that what we are doing is bringing improved HEALTH to the kids, I softly remarked, "Wow, I just don't remember worrying in 6th grade how college was going to be paid for." Any chance that the deception of hyper-competitive sports leading to scholarships allows families to enjoy large homes and newer SUVs and cell phones and not sacrifice lifestyle for a college education as our parents did? Subtle isn't it? Then your child's sport is no longer an issue of pleasure or passion but becomes a financial issue, like a job. Talk about possible tension when your 15 year old decides after 10 years and tens of thousands of dollars in competitive sports that they no longer enjoy softball and soccer - - when exactly did your child's sport or hobby become their job? When was it that your child's performance [not the type of person they are] became a meter of **your** success as a parent? Is how far your child progresses in sports intended to be **your** report card?

Let me enter into the medical zone a little further. We now have 5th-12th graders that don't get home from sports practice until close to 8 pm. After this they need to work on their homework and school assignments. We are raising a generation on less and less sleep. Now your high school teenager routinely stops by Starbucks for a large coffee for stops by 7-11 for a Monster drink to get through their school day or sports practices. Message to your kids: "Its okay to use chemical enhancers to support your impossible schedule." Or a recent horror to me as a pediatrician when a patient parent commented on the fact that 2/3rds of the peers on her child's select soccer team have asthma inhalers and soon after that a different patient parent called to ask me to send in a prescription of Advair for her **non-asthmatic** child as her child had run out of steam during one of these grueling summer practices and the coach encouraged her child to use a peer's inhaler and "It really seemed to help." **Have we arrived at the place that would get your coach fired and child kicked off the team at the Olympic level: we are now utilizing Albuterol, Xopenex and Advair inhalers as performance-enhancing drugs!** It is a wonder to me that we haven't had more kids in the ER or hospitalized for heat exhaustion or heart damage due to the combination of pushing the body past its natural ability during extreme heat while utilizing medications that are known to cause increased work load on the heart muscle.

Where do we go from here? Can you remember the best part of your child's personality at age 2, 3, 4 or 5? Were they kind, generous, just plain fun to be around, compassionate, inquisitive? Can you still see those qualities in your son or daughter? ***Perhaps you could purposefully begin affirming those qualities which reflect whom your child is, not what they are doing.*** Some examples: "I appreciate your kindness of heart towards your friends/siblings." "I just enjoy being with you." "I love seeing how sensitive you are to other kids who are struggling." "You really are a joy to everyone around you." **Every other external influence in your child's life is going to measure them through performance; it is your job as the parent to encourage, affirm and guard their heart, who they really are.**

**Your child's heart and soul hold the capacity of HOW they will do whatever they do in life:** with generosity or selfishness, with confidence or shame, with joy and passion or forced performance, with a sense of courageous trust the the **person** they are impacts others' lives far more than any goal they will obtain — or with a disconnected, efficient but not gracious, heart accomplishing all the tasks each season of life demands from them.

***What about in elementary and middle school, choosing to take each child out once a month for "date night" with Mom and Dad and using that time to encourage and affirm and verbalize the qualities you most enjoy or appreciate about this child.*** I encourage you to help your child put a voice and description to their emotions so that they will readily share with you about their day at school and often the "Micro-traumas" that can occur with adverse or painful peer interactions or feelings of inadequacy when struggling to understand a new academic concept or assignment. It is the elements of their day that impact their heart — building or stealing joy, confidence, sense of self and their value and worth.

Finally, I want to encourage you as parents to train yourself to express affirmation and affection towards your child or children as this is how health and wholeness of heart takes place. When is the last time your child heard you say, "I really love you." "Your Dad and I really like and enjoy you." "I/We are so thankful that you are our kid." "You are a great kid." "Do you know how special you are?" "I really appreciate and enjoy how helpful/kind/fun/joyful/content you are."

I wrote this letter and updated it in 2026 because we are at great risk of having younger generations with incredible potential of exchange of information and efficient production yet with very little connection to others at the level of the heart. Let's breath LIFE into their hearts!

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