

## “MOM, IS THERE A LAW AGAINST WASTING TIME?”

By Laura Davis and Janis Keyser

Between kids and step-kids, Paula is a mother nine times over. She is also a professional fund-raiser, writer, and film producer. One afternoon, in a rare moment without children, she talked about the conflicts inherent in having a career and being a mother. Paula mentioned an interchange with her four-year-old son, Sam, which had shifted her perspective irrevocably. “I’d put in the better part of a year working full-time on a stressful job that kept my mind filled with deadlines and details and efficiency, not on the daily needs of my kids. One day while I was madly rushing around the house trying to get things done, Sam stopped me and asked, ‘Mom, is there a law against wasting time?’ That stopped me dead in my tracks. For Sam to ask that question, I knew something was wrong with the way I was living.”

Kids need unscheduled time at home when they don’t have chores, family expectations, or friends over; when the TV isn’t on, when the video games are put away, when they’re not being entertained. Kids need open space, free time, time to choose or to flounder, to be faced with, “Gee, I don’t have anything to do now. What am I going to do with myself?” If children don’t have the time to figure that out, they become more and more externally motivated and outwardly focused.

### “Dad, I’m Bored”:

#### Helping Children Appreciate Free Time

When kids have moved at the world’s pace for a long time, they may initially complain and struggle when faced with free time. Older children may come to you and say “I’m bored.” Younger children might hang on your leg, whining. At that point, they may need some support from you in rediscovering the pleasures of free time. The following strategies can help you respond in ways that encourage children to develop their own solutions:

- **Identify what’s happening.** Reflect back to your child that it looks like he has some time he could do something with.

- **Be empathetic.** Listen to the feelings of frustration that might come up as your child tries to figure out what to do.
- **Help children reflect on their mood.** Ask older children to think about what they feel like doing and share with younger children what you observe about their energy: “You look like you’re full of jumps.” “You look like you’re ready to curl up on the couch and do something quiet.”
- **Help your child think about what to do.** Remind your child about the kinds of things you know she likes to do: “You like to roll in the grass with Spunky.” Questions like, “What could you build with your blocks?” or “Where could you do some jumping?” can help start children’s creative juices flowing.
- **Help your child get started, if necessary.** If you help your child begin an activity, mention beforehand that you will help him get started, but that you are going to go back to what you were doing.
- **Don’t interrupt your child.** Avoid unnecessary interruptions when children become involved in creative, self-directed play. Be as flexible as you can when you need to interrupt: “I need some help feeding the cat. Is now a good time or would you like to do it after dinner?” Also, give warnings about transitions: “In five minutes it’s going to be time for all the trains to go back to the station.”
- **Create an environment that supports creative play.** Provide age appropriate, open-ended materials for children’s use. Examples include paper, markers, scissors, tape, empty cereal boxes, scraps of material, big refrigerator boxes, small blankets, blocks, sand, water, and dirt. If possible, provide some space that can get messy --- a back porch, a corner of the kitchen, a dirt area out back. Children’s creative play isn’t usually a neat or tidy activity.
- **Slow down, you’re moving too fast.** Children learn a lot by watching how we live. When kids see us coming home stressed and preoccupied, day after day, they learn that life doesn’t feel very good, that being a grownup is a grind. So part of the slowing

down has to start with us. And it's possible to begin those changes in small, daily ways.

- **Waste a little time with your child today.** When you decide to slow down with your children, you join them in discovering imagination, spontaneity, fun, and resourcefulness. You get to re-experience simple pleasures: noticing a rainbow, taking a nap, whipping up a batch of brownies, designing a treasure hunt, going for a leisurely stroll. Anyone can do it. You don't have to be an at-home parent to slip a little spontaneity and magic into your moments with your kids. You can be a busy parent and still relax fully and robustly. It doesn't take all day to waste a little bit of time.
- **Take a penny walk.** One mother decided she wanted more down-time with her children. So she started taking them on penny walks. She and her kids would go outside with a penny. When they reached the end of their driveway, they flipped it. If it landed heads, they went to the right. If it was tails, they turned left. When they reached the corner, they flipped it again. They kept flipping that penny at every intersection until they got tired and decided to go home. Whatever happened spontaneously on penny walks was okay, but no errands were allowed.
- **Be a role model.** Karyn, who was a single parent when Bryan was three, tells the following story: "One day I was working in the garden and Bryan was hanging on my legs, wanting me to play with him. Exhausted by his constant interruptions, I wanted to pull weeds, to think, to have a few moments alone. I told him, 'I want to be by myself for fifteen minutes. You can still be out here, but I don't want to talk to you or play with you. Then you can talk to me.' Bryan cried a little. Then he played with his trucks in the mud. I pulled a patch of weeds and went inside. When I came out to find him, he was sitting on a little block of wood at the edge of the patio, looking out at the garden. I said, 'Honey, I'm here now.' And he said, 'Look, I just want five or ten minutes by myself.' 'Okay,' I told him, 'Come to me when you're done.'" By modeling her need for time alone and by respecting her son's request, Karyn taught him to value something that was important to her -- the gift of solitude.

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The above is an excerpt from *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be: A Sourcebook of Strategies for the First Five Years* (Broadway Books, 1997) by Laura Davis and Janis Keyser.

Laura Davis is the co-author of the best-selling *Courage to Heal* and the author of *The Courage to Heal Workbook* and *Allies in Healing*. She is the mother of two children under

five and the stepmother of a young adult. She writes a monthly column for parents in Santa Cruz, CA.

Janis Keyser is a parenting educator and program director. She teaches in the Early Childhood Education department at Cabrillo College and has been conducting workshops and facilitating parenting classes for twenty years. She is the mother of three, the stepmother of five and the grandmother of twelve.

*The following poem, by an anonymous author, came over the Internet:*

Have you ever watched kids on a merry-go-round  
Or listened to rain slapping on the ground?  
Ever followed a butterfly's beautiful flight,  
Or gazed at the sun into fading night?

You'd better slow down; don't you dance so fast  
Time is short, and the music won't last.

Do you run through each day always on the fly?  
When you ask "How are you?" do you hear the reply?  
When the day is done, do you lie in your bed  
With the next hundred chores running through your head?

You'd better slow down; don't you dance so fast  
Time is short, and the music won't last.

Ever told a child, "We'll do it tomorrow,"  
And in your haste, not seen his sorrow?  
Ever lost touch, let a friendship die  
'Cause you never had time to call and say "Hi"?

You'd better slow down; don't you dance so fast  
Time is short, and the music won't last.

When you run so fast to get somewhere,  
You miss half the fun of just getting there.  
When you worry and hurry throughout your day,  
It's like an unopened gift...that's been thrown away.

Life is not a race, try to take it slower,  
Stop and hear the music before the song is over.

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