

Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)

Too Much, All the Time Workshops Help Parents Take Back Family Life

October 2, 2001

Section: PEOPLE

Page: C1

By Nancy Sheehan

Cindy Kalish has seen the frantic future, and she's in no hurry to get there.

"I watch the soccer moms with three different games on a Saturday, and one kid has to be someplace the same time another has to be someplace else, or they're running between a dance lesson, a swimming lesson and gymnastics," she said. It's an overscheduled, breathless life Ms. Kalish, a full-time social worker, hopes to avoid as her 3 1/2-year-old daughter grows up. But, she admits, it will be difficult to avoid the stepped-up pace most families face, and she already has enrolled her daughter in a scaled-for-kids piano class.

"As she gets older, I think we'll really try to pick and choose what she does and not succumb to the feeling that we have to do everything," Ms. Kalish said. "But at the same time, there is a lot of pressure to do it all."

That pressure comes from a growing sense that children will be left behind if they aren't enriched nearly to death by structured activities -- before school, after school, on weekends -- every waking minute.

"I've seen an increase in anxiety in parents who feel the pressure of having their children in activities at an earlier and earlier age," said Karen Kaufman, director of the nursery school at Temple Emanuel in Worcester for 14 years. "There is this feeling that you can't start too early or do too much. It's in books. It's on TV. It's in the air."

The result is that families are increasingly fragmented. There is little time for the traditional family dinner, studies show, and household conversations are echoes of the past.

To help families cope with that caught-on-a-treadmill feeling, Ms. Kaufman and psychologist **Beth Greenberg** of Jewish Family Service have developed a series of four workshops designed to help harried parents find time to actually sit in one place for a while, surrounded by their families.

The hour-and-a-half-long workshops, one each in November, January, March and May, are aimed at parents of children 6 and younger. The workshops, supported by a grant from the Worcester-based Leo H. Rudnick Family Trust, will be held at Jewish Family Service of Worcester and Temple Emanuel, but are open to parents of all faiths. They will focus on a variety of topics,

include balancing time pressures, building confidence in parenting skills and strengthening connections with family members and the community.

Inspiration for the series was drawn from the work of William Doherty, director of the marriage and family-therapy program at the University of Minnesota and author of "The Intentional Family: How to Build Family Ties in Our Modern World."

Mr. Doherty's research also has fueled a growing grass-roots movement to help parents place a high priority on family activities in a world that often tends to pull family members in separate directions.

He recommends a community-based approach, because it is difficult for individual parents to take back family life in a culture that defines good parenting as providing more and more and doing more for their children. The ever-accelerating treadmill Mr. Doherty sees is one of sports seasons growing longer, practices and games becoming more frequent, fine arts programs more intense and religious youth programs more consuming.

Among things parents can do is band together to ask that sports practices not cut into dinnertime or the traditional peace of Sunday mornings, Ms. Kaufman said. On a smaller scale, parents can look at the number of activities with which their children are involved.

"As a first step, if you have school-age children, is to talk with them," Ms. Greenberg said. "Ask how do they feel about their schedule. Do they like it? Are they overwhelmed?"

The answers might be surprising. Ms. Greenberg, spoke recently with a mother who had just told her little girl she had to choose one activity to drop from her crowded schedule.

"She said, 'I was feeling so terrible. I was thinking, 'I'm taking away this opportunity for her. She's going to be devastated,' " Ms. Greenberg said. "But the child's reaction was 'Oh. Thank goodness. I felt like I was doing too much.' "

It's a situation of which Christie Little, a mother of five children ages 3 to 13, has learned to let go.

"We have real clear understandings that everyone's only allowed one or two activities, and everything has to be run through the family schedule to make sure it fits together," she said recently, on the car phone during one of her many chauffeuring stints that result nevertheless.

An activity's acid test? Can mom get you there and can mom pick you up without destroying the already-tight schedule and family life? The most important part of that schedule is dinner, which the whole family sits down to virtually every night about 7:30, after her husband, Dr. Bruce Meyer, chairman of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department at UMass Memorial Healthcare in Worcester, gets home.

"It's a chance for all of us to connect with each other and hear about everybody's day," Ms. Little said. "It's a lot of fun. My kids get upset if, for some reason, they miss family dinner."

At the table, she goes over and finalizes family plans for the next day. "My 4-year-old calls it 'the game plan,' " Ms. Little said. "Every night, she asks, 'What's the game plan?'"

But even the best plans aren't always immune to morning mania. "The worst times are the

mornings. There's a whole lot more time-element pressure there," said Ms. Little, who is living temporarily in Webster while the family's Worcester home undergoes remodeling. "Right now, the biggest problem I face is one bathroom."

The biggest problem many teen-agers face is getting into college without surrendering to stress.

"The ante has been raised, and it keeps getting raised higher every year," Ms. Kaufman, the mother of two teen-agers, said. "Now it's not enough to get straight A's. Now you have to get straight A's and be president of this club and a leader of that. It's like we're asking children to build resumes at such an early age."

The workshops will cover ways to handle such pressures, as well as letting parents know they're not alone in feeling them.

"It's so hard to buck the trend when the whole world is going the other way," Ms. Kaufman said. "To be able to step back from all the information that's coming at us and say, 'Just a minute. What do I want for my family and my children?'"

Making time for family

Observing family rituals is a good way to carve family time out of busy schedules, therapist William Doherty of the University of Minnesota says. "The idea is not to eliminate outside activities, but to find a balance between individual needs and those of the family," said Karen Kaufman, a Worcester educator who will lead a series of workshops based on Mr. Doherty's work.

Among the possibilities are:

- Have the whole family sit down together for a meal at home at least once a week.
- Set aside a specific night each week for a family meal in a restaurant.
- Establish one night a week as a "no TV" night and pursue other family activities instead -- games, puzzles or music, for example.
- Read or recite your child's favorite story each night at bedtime.
- Reserve one night a week for parents' night out as a couple.
- Place special notes saying, "I love you," in your child's lunchbox.

Family enrichment workshop series

A program for parents of children 6 and younger

Where: Locations will alternate between Jewish Family Service of Worcester, 646 Salisbury St., and Temple Emanuel, 280 May St., Worcester

When: 6 to 7:30 p.m. Nov. 1, Jan. 10, March 7 and May 2

How much: \$36 for all four workshops, which includes a light supper and baby-sitting

More information: Contact Karen Kaufman at (508) 755-1257, or **Beth Greenberg** at (508) 755-3101