

Unhurrying Childhood: Why Slowing Down Is the Best Thing for Our Kids

During COVID lockdowns, despite how hard it was, many of us quietly promised ourselves, “*We’re never going back to the rat race*”?

For many of us, we appreciated the slower pace, the extra family time, and the relief from overscheduled calendars. And yet... here we are. Back to full days, packed evenings, and exhausted kids. Somewhere along the way, we broke that promise.

Welcome to the age of the *Hurried Child*.

What Is Hurried Child Syndrome?

Psychologist Dr David Elkind coined the term “Hurried Child Syndrome” to describe what happens when we push our children to grow up too fast. It looks like:

- Children treated like mini-adults
- Academics pushed too early
- Overscheduled after-school calendars
- Exposure to adult issues and responsibilities

It’s not just that kids are busy. It’s that their childhoods are being compressed—squeezed by performance expectations, screens, and a culture that measures worth by achievement.

The Fallout of a Hurried Childhood

Children living this hurried life experience real consequences:

- Increased anxiety, depression, and stress
- Sleep issues and poor eating habits
- A drop in resilience
- A painful sense of failure and unworthiness when they don’t meet adult-level expectations

One of the most damaging outcomes? Perfectionism. When kids feel they must always get things right to be good enough, they stop taking healthy risks. They stop enjoying learning. They stop feeling safe just being kids.

Why Do We Let This Happen?

Our intentions are good. We want our kids to succeed - to fulfill their potential. We fear they’ll fall behind. And we live in a competitive parenting culture that whispers, “*If you’re not doing everything, you’re doing it wrong.*”

But what if this constant striving is doing more harm than good?

Childhood isn't a race. And it's not our job to hustle our kids into the future. It's our job to give them a safe, steady present.

Three Ways to Unhurry Your Child's Life

If we want to change this culture of hurry, we have to get intentional. Here are three powerful ways to start:

1. Prioritise Play

Unstructured, child-led play is the most natural and essential activity for children. It builds:

- Cognitive development (problem solving, creativity)
- Social skills (negotiation, collaboration)
- Emotional intelligence (empathy, coping strategies)

And yes, it takes time. But carving out opportunities for your child to play—especially with other kids, especially outdoors—may be the single best thing you can do for their development and wellbeing.

2. Let Children Set the Pace

It's tempting to map out our children's futures for them. But when we pressure them to chase *our* goals, we rob them of ownership over their own goals. Instead:

- Get curious about what lights them up
- Help them explore their own interests and strengths
- Let them take the long road if that's what they need

One of Australia's most decorated Olympians, Emma McKeon, credits her success not to parental pressure but to the freedom her parents gave her to pursue swimming on her own terms. Roger Federer says the same thing, confessing he didn't even like tennis until his late teens.

3. Create a Balanced Schedule

If your child eats more meals in the car than at the table, it may be time to reassess. A full calendar isn't always a meaningful one. Instead of cramming in every extracurricular, ask:

- Is my child thriving or just surviving?
- Are we getting enough sleep, downtime, and connection?
- Is there space for boredom, creativity, and rest?

Sometimes less really is more.

Final Thought

The hurried child is not a modern problem we have to accept. It's a cultural drift we can resist. And it starts with us—the grown-ups. We can choose slow over rushed. We can let our children be children. We can let them breathe. Unhurrying childhood might be the most loving, protective thing we ever do.



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