

Children and Time

An artist once wrote that he lived primarily in space and not in time. The same could be said for children. Young children are not as clock oriented as we adults. For us an activity is very often determined by the hands on a clock. We eat when the clock says it's time for breakfast or dinner; we work at our jobs between a certain hour in the morning and another hour in the afternoon; and if we are taking an airplane trip, we can find a way to just sit there from the appointed hour of take-off until the designated time for landing.

Time works differently for young children. It may actually be more accurate to say that time actually doesn't work for children. They don't live in the *time* of an activity but, like the artist, in the *space* of the activity. That's why we often hear ourselves saying things like, "It's time to put your toys away and get ready for bed." We looked at the clock and decided it was *time* for bed; our child, on the other hand, was involved in the *space* of her activity and saw no need to get ready for bed. It is also why we hear ourselves saying, "No, you can't have that snack now. It will spoil your appetite when it is *time* for dinner." We try to maintain a *time* schedule for meals while the child lives in the *space* of hunger and desire.

There is a state of being that psychologists refer to as *flow*. The term is used to describe the type of circumstance when we are so engrossed in an activity that we lose track of time. We may experience *flow* when we are putting a puzzle together, reading a book, or surfing the web. All of a sudden we look up and hours have passed by and we had no sense that we were engaged with the activity for so long. Children naturally experience this sense of *flow* more often than we adults. Whether it's building with construction blocks, creating a mini-drama with the dolls, or designing colorful drawings, children can get lost in their activity. It's not that time stands still for them but it's more like time doesn't even exist.

Of course time does exist and sometimes time necessarily imposes itself on a child's *flow-like* activity. That's why we have those battles about putting away the toys and when it is time to stop playing and get into bed. It's also why taking the long car ride to visit the grandparents can be such a challenging experience for both parents and child. We adults can focus on the beginning and end *times* of the journey but the child is living every

moment in the *space* of the car. And sometimes that space is cramped and uncomfortable, and sometimes that space is boring.

Many of our experiences in life are structured by time and children will, by necessity, have to learn how to adapt their behavior and activity to the constraints of time. Families eat at certain times, the school bus arrives at the corner at a particular time, and homework is due when the teacher says it is due. But the fact that children have to adapt to the constraints of time doesn't mean it's an easy thing for them to do. It will take *time* for them to adjust to the structures of *time*. We need to respect their perspective about time and have *patience*, which is another way of saying that we need to let them change and develop at their own pace, in their own *time*. We may also find ourselves jealous of our children's ability to become so engrossed in an activity that time loses meaning. Perhaps we need to look for our own ways of living in *space* and not in *time*.

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