



## GIVE THEM A CHILDHOOD

By Marilyn Sharpe

A friend called to say that her 11 year old daughter was excelling ... in everything! Her piano teacher wanted her home schooled so that she would have eight hours a day to devote to practicing piano; then the talented child could begin to perform around the country and, quite possibly, around the world. Her ballet teacher encouraged mother and daughter to relocate, leaving the father and five siblings behind, to perform with an internationally acclaimed ballet school in New York City. The girl's English teacher urged enrolling her in an East Coast college's residential summer writing program, to hone already exceptional writing skills. What's a parent to do?

A second grader called her favorite school friend to invite her over to play. After trying every day that week, the friend said she'd have her mother call to arrange it. The mother of the busy second grader shared that her daughter was very involved with drama, both classes and performance, and did not have any day of any week available to play. What's a parent to do?

A college friend, pregnant with her first child, called, concerned, to recount a conversation with another parent that morning. Discovering that the birth was only three months away, the new friend enquired about where the baby was enrolled for nursery school. "What?" my friend laughed. "He's not even born yet." "Oh, no," the new friend responded. "Then it is too late. And if he isn't enrolled at the right preschool, he'll never get into the right prep school, and he won't be able to go to Harvard!" My friend was anxious that she had already ruined her child's chance for a fulfilling life. What's a parent to do?

We live in a society that values excellence and performance and accomplishment. That's not bad. But what is happening in all three of these scenarios (real ones, I might add)? In each, children, young children are being tracked for high performance and accomplishment. What's missing? A childhood! Time to unfold and explore, to dream and to be, to wonder and become all that God has created the child to be.

Summer is coming, and with it, lots of opportunities for children to play sports, learn new skills and subjects, explore new interests, travel, camp. Often, as parents, our job appears to be keeping the calendar and coordinating car pools.

Let me suggest something that no one else in all the world can give your child: a childhood. Plan some protected, unscheduled time for your children to dream, to think, to wonder, to imagine, to play a game they invent, to make new friends and deepen old friendships, to be bored and recognize that as an invitation to explore what they would like to do next, to learn to enjoy the pleasure of their own company, to experience time with family, to have Sabbath time with God.

These are children of God, created in God's image to be human beings, not just human doings. They come to us as God's buds, meant to open into the fullness of who they are slowly, organically, across childhood. Forcing the bud to open distorts the flower God has begun. Grace abounds and children are not expected to be small, finished, accomplished adults at 11 or 7 or before they are even born. This God who created them in love, who gave them unique gifts to enjoy and to share with others in God's family, says

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

This God has entrusted them to your care. Please give them a childhood.

### FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Let your children re-teach you how to play. Spend time following their playful lead. Thank the God of play.
2. Schedule part of every day as time alone for each child, a perfect time to imagine, daydream, create, play, just enjoy being alone. Thank God, who is with us always.
3. Protect time each week that is just for family. Rotate who decides what you'll do. Thank God, who created you as family.
4. Get outside to a park, a public garden, forest, or lake. Walk. Explore. Watch clouds go by. Thank the God of creation.
5. Write and illustrate a children's book together, using a favorite family story. Read it to a child. Thank God for joining your story to God's story.