

Discussion Item 5

Pick a month during the school year. List all the extracurricular activities each member (child, youth, adult) is involved in during that month.

Discuss: "My opinion about this list is _____."

"When everyone in our family is so busy, it makes me feel _____." (If desired, the same list can be done for a whole year.)

Discussion Item 6

In our family each person has space in their weekly schedules for "creative down time" (time during a day to do what he/she chooses, including time to simply relax).

Discussion Item 7

Extracurricular activities cost extra family money. In our family the costs of extracurricular activities put financial stress on other family needs. At times this means there are other things we have to pass up in order to afford the extracurricular costs.

"When I think about this it makes me feel _____."

"I would be willing to give up _____ to help our family have money for _____."

Discussion Item 8

As a family we want to make the following changes in the things we've talked about [pick only 2 or 3 to start].

In 3 months we will sit together to evaluate how it is working.

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"In Wisdom and Stature"

A Call by the North Dakota Conference of Churches for Reflection on Extracurricular Activities for Youth and Children



Introduction

Sacred Scripture tells us that Jesus grew in “wisdom and stature.” (Lk 2:52) All parents seek the same for their children and extracurricular activities provide excellent opportunities for growth and development. However, when done for the wrong reasons or done without the proper balance between the activities, school, family, and religious obligations, the consequences can be detrimental to the children, the family, and the community.

As shepherds of Christian churches in North Dakota, we think the issue of extracurricular activities for youth deserves attention. As pastors concerned about the well-being of our flocks, we have an interest in how extracurricular activities affect our children, families, and communities. As ministers, we often have direct experience with the effects of extracurricular activities on families, church activities, and local events. As teachers, we are called to remind people of what matters most.

We offer these observations fully recognizing that parents are the primary educators and caregivers for their children. Parents must choose what is best for their children. The church can only offer advice and support. Moreover, we are cognizant of the danger of over-generalizing. Since all children and families differ, circumstances also differ. We do not insist on a “one size fits all” approach. Rather, we offer these principles for guidance and matters for reflection.

- Parents should consider whether your family, religious, and school obligations have their proper place, whether a proper balance exists in the lives of your children, and about what messages we are sending as to what is important and what is not.
- Schools and organizers should reflect on their roles and consider whether they are contributing to or hindering the ability of families to put religious, family, and school obligations in their proper place. Like parents, schools and organizers should also reflect about what messages they are sending as to what is important and what is not.
- Extracurricular activities offer many benefits. Parents should find what activities are best suited for their children and give them support for engaging in activities which strengthen their body, mind, and character.
- All involved should work for reasonable frequency and scheduling of events, games, and practices. We should keep the tradition of reserving Wednesday nights and Sundays for family and religious activities.
- Extracurricular activities should reach out and include the greatest number of interested children.
- We must affirm and strengthen the role of parents.

Conclusion

For the most part, organizers, schools, and parents have acted responsibly with extracurricular activities and the children of North Dakota are showing the benefits of such activities. As with many things, however, the problems can slowly creep up on us so that it is too late to effectively deal with problems. It may not seem, at first, a problem to schedule just one game on a Sunday, or start a child in a sport before first grade, or travel 100 miles to a game, or reward an athlete that showed up to practice on a Wednesday night. Eventually, however, these types of acceptances erode at our social fabric by disrupting the proper balance of things. In the long run, it is the children who suffer most.

Jesus grew in wisdom and stature in a family and a community. *By working together to make the best of extracurricular activities we can help ensure that those activities positively contribute to the growth of our children — and ourselves — in wisdom and stature.*

It is intended that the members of a family discuss any or all of these Discussion Items together, with each having an opportunity to express their personal opinions and feelings about each item. All opinions and feelings are to be respected even if there are differences.

Discussion Item 1

In our family we spend about ___ hours each week together in family activities. (Family activities include: shared meal times, worship, family leisure activities, work projects done together.)

Discussion Item 2

In our family we have enough family time together for doing the things identified in Discussion Item 1. ___ Yes ___ No
One thing I wish we had more time together for is _____.
The reason I would like more of this time together is _____.

Discussion Item 3

The most hectic time of the year for our family, the time when all of our activities create the highest levels of stress for our family, is _____.
“By the end of this most hectic time I usually feel _____.”
“One way I think we can make this better is _____.”

Discussion Item 4

In any one week, our family does/does not have, adequate time for faith-based activities (such as worship, Sunday School, youth groups, Bible studies, etc.).
“I wish we would take more time for _____.”

children of different skill levels, even if it means refusing to organize activities for children until the age where a substantial number of them are interested in participating. Waiting a few years before engaging in an activity will not harm a young child. Again, we must remember that the purpose of such activities is not to create professionals, but to help them grow and foster social relationships.

We must also recognize that some children may not participate in every available activity and that parents have a duty to restrict or limit participation in an activity when they think it necessary. Coaches, instructors, and other parents should respect the decisions of those parents and not put pressure on them to include their children in activities. Nor should the impression be given that it is inappropriate for parents to limit participation in activities.

Importance of Parents

The success of any activity depends on the parents who sacrifice time and money so that their children can take advantage of these special opportunities. Families should support each other. This applies not only to assisting each other with activities like traveling and fundraising, but also with support for each other's children and support for parents that choose to limit their child's activities.

Parents must keep the well-being of their children foremost in mind. If an activity or practice schedule is putting undue pressure on the child, parents should feel free to exercise their parental judgment and withhold the child from that activity or particular practice. Coaches and instructors should respect the parent's decision. While instilling a sense of team commitment and perseverance is an important part of such activities, those values should never outweigh the child's needs.

Parents must also focus on their child's individual growth, rather than the child's acquisition of particular skills or accomplishments. Likewise, parents should discourage an "us versus them" attitude in team sports and never allow name calling or disrespectful behavior toward an opponent. Children have a right to engage in activities in a positive environment. Organizers and fellow parents have an obligation to ensure that parents do not act in a way demeaning toward any child, including their own. The same demand for respect applies to other parents, coaches, and referees.

The Proper Role of Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities offer many benefits. Studies show that children involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to have problems with substance abuse, sexual activity, and low self-esteem. Such activities can become a source of community pride.

Parents and communities should always respect the proper role of such activities. By definition, extracurricular activities are not part of a necessary education curriculum and should never eclipse academic obligations. Moreover, such activities are not capable of replacing essential institutions of the community, such as family and church, and placing too much emphasis on extracurricular activities will endanger, rather than foster, the common good.

Time Commitments, Scheduling, and Respect for the Sabbath

When the North Dakota Conference of Churches examined the impact of extracurricular activities, parents, youth, and pastors identified time constraints as the greatest problem. Pastors especially expressed concern about both the time children were devoting to such activities and scheduling issues.

Although the maxim, "practice makes perfect" may be true, we must remember that achieving perfection is not the purpose of youth extracurricular activities. Practicing should not, therefore, be so extensive as to interfere with either the proper development of the child or the child's proper participation in other activities, such as studying, time with family, and religious observances. We urge parents and ministers to speak up, support each other, and restore a proper balance when practice commitments become a problem.

The scheduling of practice and events is a related problem. To some extent, the problem, where it exists, is related to the problem of over-practicing. If the pressure to practice were not so great, schools, families, and churches would not encounter so many scheduling conflicts. To some extent, the scheduling problem seems to reflect a slow erosion of the community values that grew out of respect for family, church, and the recognition that the human person needs days of rest and recreation. North Dakota communities have had a long tradition of reserving Wednesday nights for church and family activities. Nevertheless, there seems to exist increasing pressure to eliminate or ignore that tradition.

For example, we received reports of Wednesday nights that are "free" in name only. Technically, students were not required to practice on Wednesday night. The gym, however, remained open for those willing to come and those that did not were less likely to play in the next game. We strongly urge schools to discourage such practices.

While schools have, for the most part, been respectful of Wednesday nights and Sundays, it appears that privately organized activities have been less so. *We urge private organizations engaged in youth extracurricular activities to follow the tradition and keep Wednesday nights and Sundays free.*

The growing frequency of events on Sundays is of particular concern. Both schools and private organizations have started games and practices on Sundays, even early in the morning. The Sabbath is not merely a religious practice. It reflects the fact that human persons and communities need a period of rest and recreation, in the true sense of the word. *Adding one more day of extracurricular activities not only interferes with and fails to respect the religious traditions of most of our citizens, but it also denies the participants and the community the rest and recreation that is essential to the common good.*

We are well aware that these scheduling issues often arise from difficulties with obtaining access to gyms and travel times, especially in smaller towns. While we sympathize with this problem, it should give the community a reason to question its direction and the extent that it is cooperating in an unbalanced approach to extracurricular activities.

Another day traditionally set aside in North Dakota is the day of the state teacher's convention. For years, religious bodies have used this once a year event to hold youth rallies. It is one of the few times that students all across the state have off. In recent years, however, there have been attempts by organizers of some extracurricular activities to use those days for practices or events. We urge schools and activities organizers to continue the tradition of leaving this day free for other activities.

Those involved should also examine travel commitments. Our state's rural nature means that teams must often travel long distances to play teams from another place. Some such events, like the state Class B basketball tournament, are state traditions. Nevertheless, it might behoove us to question whether travelling long distances and whether playing teams from other places is really necessary to accomplish the true purpose of the activity. This seems especially pertinent for young persons and commitments that involve weekend travel.

Coaches, instructors, and other persons should respect a family's choice not to practice or play when it interferes with their personal, moral, religious, or family obligations. No participant should ever be penalized for missing a practice or event because of such a commitment. Those organizing such events should also respect those who recognize a sabbath other than Sunday.

Fostering Participation and Diversity

Extracurricular activities should reach out and include the greatest number of children interested in participation. Excessive practice times may discourage participation by children with other commitments, including those which cannot be sacrificed, such as school, religious, and family obligations. Similarly, seasons should not run longer than necessary. Limiting seasons gives children the opportunity to rest or try new activities. *When determining the appropriate length of seasons and the practice schedule, we must remember that the goal of any extracurricular activity is to foster the full development of our children. It is not to create a winning team or future professional athletes.*

Including the greatest number of interested children also means that recruitment for activities should cross geographic, economic, racial, and social distinctions. Organizers should make every effort to ensure that the costs of participation are not unduly prohibitive for those with less means and work to provide a real opportunity for children with special needs to participate.

Schools, public and nonpublic, have a particular role in fostering full participation. As leaders in the community, they should foster diversity in both the types of activities and the participants. Schools should accommodate and welcome participation by students that may not have a similar opportunity in their own educational setting. For example, larger schools should accept participation by students from smaller schools and public and nonpublic schools should be open to participation by home educated children.

All children can benefit from extracurricular activities. Each child, however, is unique. What may appeal to some children, will not to others. Schools and communities, therefore, should not only foster a diversity of activities, but should not, directly or subtly, give preference to one activity over another. Respect for all types of activities should be promoted and parents, in particular, should avoid characterizing some activities as less valuable than others.

Since the purpose of extracurricular activities is to foster the development of the whole person, parents should exercise great care to ensure that the activity is appropriate for their child's age, physical and mental ability, and social skills. Some children will be ready for certain activities before others and may start acquiring the skills of that activity while others at that age are not ready or able to participate.

This leads to another problem often voiced by parents — inequity in skills. Often, children begin to participate in an activity, only to find that some of their peers are much better prepared because they have been participating in previous years. This can be demoralizing for the child and can frustrate, if not end, the child's chances to participate. *We encourage organizers of activities to take a serious look at this problem and find ways to embrace*