

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO HELP FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

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## How to Guard Sabbath for Your Children

by Jen Wilkin

My oldest son started high school this fall. At his orientation the counselors spoke to parents about the greatest challenge they see students face in school. I expected to hear about poor study habits or substance abuse, but to my initial surprise, these were not at the top of the list. Apparently, the greatest challenge presenting itself in the office of the high school guidance counselor is a growing number of kids struggling with anxiety and depression. Can you guess why? A combination of over-scheduling and sleep deprivation, linked to two main contributors: electronics use and extracurricular activities. We were encouraged as parents to go home and talk to our teenagers about setting boundaries in these areas. Parents across the auditorium scribbled notes furiously as the counselors outlined some suggestions: limit texting, monitor bedtimes, cut back on team practices. I couldn't help but think to myself: tonight there will be many demonstrations of teenage angst when mom shows up with her new list of suggestions.

What is unfolding at my son's high school is a clear illustration of spiritual truth: the need for regular periods of rest in our lives. From the earliest pages of the Bible we find God instituting patterns of activity and rest--not just any kind of rest, but rest with the intent to engage in worship and community. The concept of Sabbath weaves its way through the Old Testament and the New, occupying a prominent place among the Ten Commandments and informing our understanding of heaven.

Despite biblical precedent, few Christians understand or practice Sabbath as a regular part of life, and consequently, neither do their children. Christian parents bear the responsibility of teaching our children the value of rest, through our words and through our actions. Children don't set the calendar in our homes--if they are overscheduled or sleep-deprived, the fault lies with us. How can we better discharge our duty of raising children to seek Sabbath? To value down-time to reconnect with God and family?

While I admire the high school guidance counselors' optimism, age 14 is probably too late to start imposing boundaries on our child's rest habits and schedule. We need a plan, and we need it early. How will we safeguard for our families the key Sabbath concepts of rest, worship, and community? Here are a few suggestions that have helped our family to honor God in our rest.

### Electronics

Late-night texting and TV watching, online chatting, surfing the internet--all can rob a child of rest. Children between the ages of 7 and 12 require a whopping 10 to 11 hours of sleep each night. This is the very age range during which most acquire the electronics to rob them of needed sleep. Parents can guard their children's rest simply by keeping electronics in sight. We made a rule in our home that no electronics are allowed upstairs: no TVs, computers, phones, or games in bedrooms or rooms where their use cannot be monitored.

Each night, those of us who have phones leave them in a spot on the kitchen counter. These measures give us accountability to each other, keep electronics as a shared rather than an individual privilege, and force our electronics to obey our family's Sabbath priorities of rest, worship, community. Well-rested kids bypass many of the unsavory habits of their tired counterparts: fits, backtalk, forgetfulness, drama, isolation, and yes--anxiety and depression. Guarding your child's rest actually gives them a running start at Christlike behavior, even during adolescence.

## Activities

So many to pursue, so little time. Don't be fooled: the proliferation of activity options for children reflects our cultural affluence, not our child's need to be well-rounded or socialized. Gobs of money are being made off of our misplaced desire to expose our kids to every possible talent path. How can we choose activities for our family in a way that doesn't compromise Sabbath principles?

Because the four Wilkin kids are close in age, our schedule and finances forced us to limit activities to "one or none" for each child. Not all families need to impose a limit this low, but we have re-learned something our grandparents probably knew: children who participate in no organized activities at all still lead lives full of activity and joy. To many parents the idea of a child on no sports team, in no music lessons, at no club meetings is completely foreign and a little frightening. Won't they get bored? Won't they drive me crazy lurking around the house? Won't they miss out on an NFL career and blame me? Or, my personal favorite: Won't other parents think I'm a bad parent? I would answer all of these questions, "Maybe, but who cares?"

As is often lamented, parenting is not a popularity contest. With that in mind, here are some good (and highly unpopular) questions to ask when evaluating which activity to pursue:

Does it sabotage weekend downtime or worship?

Does it sabotage family dinners?

Does it sabotage bedtime?

Does it pull our family apart or push us together?

Is it an activity my child can enjoy/benefit from into adulthood?

Can we afford it?

Notice that "Does my child enjoy it?" is not on the list. So often I hear parents justify keeping a child in a time-sucking activity because "He loves it so much." Kids love Skittles and Mario Kart so much, but they don't get to decide if, when, and how much to consume. Because children possess a limited range of life experience, it is difficult for them to conceive of happiness outside their current circumstance. It is our job to help them learn.

## Less-than-Admirable Motives

Why do we have such a hard time as parents placing limits on electronics and activities? Both can appeal to parents for less-than-admirable reasons. Both can serve as a babysitter or a diversion. But the appeal of activities extends even further, to our very identity as parents. We actually want to be labeled "soccer mom" on rhinestone-studded tee shirts and coffee mugs. We carefully arrange our car decals so that every identity-marker is announced. The thought of removing or withholding our child from an activity threatens the very way we view ourselves.

Maybe our view needs to adjust to something a bit higher. Families that prioritize Sabbath fix their eyes on and find their identity in Christ, recognizing that their greatest potential for missed opportunity lies not in neglecting activities but in neglecting time--lots of it--spent together as a family in worship, rest, and community with each other.

God forbid we value the discipline of a sport more than the discipline of Christian living. Both require great application of time and effort, but one is worth far more than the other. Because time is our most limited resource, how we allocate it reveals much about our hearts. Our time usage should look radically different than that of the unbelieving family. We must leave time for slow afternoons, for evening meals where we pray together and share our faith and struggles, for Sunday mornings of shared worship.

God ordains Sabbath for our good and for his glory. May our homes be places where Sabbath rest is jealously guarded, that in all things God might have preeminence--even our schedules.

*See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*

*Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Ephesians 5:15-17*