

## A diet on activities

By William R. Mattox Jr.

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This New Year, I've resolved to go on a diet that allows me to pull up to the family dinner table instead of requiring me to pull away from it. And if professor William Doherty of the University of Minnesota's department of family social science is right, this new diet ought to help me lose weight — even though that's not its main purpose.

The main purpose of my diet isn't to cut calories, carbs or fat. It's to trim the activities that many families with children overindulge in on evenings and weekends. I know from lots of firsthand exposure that the lives of children and families are made richer by participation in community-based activities such as sports leagues, music programs, scout troops, church groups and service clubs.

But a recent essay by Doherty and his colleague Barbara Carlson, one of 30 in the book *Take Back Your Time*, compiled by author John De Graaf, has convinced me that extracurricular activities are a lot like the foods found in the four basic food groups. Each is good for you up to a point — but overindulgence in any (or every) area tends to throw everything out of balance.

### Family time wanes

Which is exactly what Doherty says is happening in many American homes. "Well-intentioned parents are acting like recreation directors on a turbo-charged cruise ship," he notes. Parents today have so many extracurricular activities on their household calendars that there's little room for such family activities as dinners, vacations, weekend outings and visits to relatives.

"In the face of competing demands, time is lost for family activities," Doherty says. "We end up with overscheduled and under connected families."

In fact, citing a study by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, Doherty reports that only one in three U.S. families now dine together nightly, down from two in three in the mid-1970s. Moreover, the average length of these mealtimes has declined 10% since 1981. And a 2004 study of "high-mileage moms" by the non-profit Surface Transportation Policy Project found that recent road-time increases mean the average "soccer mom" now spends more minutes each day driving than eating.

Many of these moms could probably use a vacation. But Doherty cites polling data that show that the number of families taking at least one vacation together each year has declined 28% during the past two decades. In addition to charting the decline in family activities (and unstructured free time for kids), Doherty reports that kids today are spending more than twice as much time each week playing organized sports as they did in 1981. Moreover, the time kids devote to "passive, spectator leisure" (watching brother's football game or attending sister's ballet recital) has increased sixfold, from 30 minutes a week in 1981 to more than three hours per week today.

Doherty says a number of factors have contributed to this shift from unstructured to structured children's activities, including:

- A growing sense of danger in neighborhoods, which makes parents nervous about letting children play outdoors.
- A shrinking window of opportunity for extracurricular activities; longer school days and parental work hours push many activities into evenings and weekends.
- More intense youth sports programs, including traveling teams that encourage kids to play weekend

tournaments year-round.

- Parental fears that their children will be left behind if they don't commit 110% to every activity.

### **Heavy price to pay**

"Parenting has become a competitive sport, with the trophies going to the busiest," Doherty observes. And this wouldn't be so worrisome if the family activities being sacrificed weren't so important to the well-being of children.

For example, the University of Michigan study found that the amount of time children spend dining with their families is the single strongest predictor of student test scores and behavioral problems. That's right, eating family meals together has a more positive impact on student achievement than time spent attending school, studying, going to church, playing sports or participating in artistic endeavors.

In addition, a recent study in the *Archives of Family Medicine* found that children who regularly dine with their families eat better. They consume more fruits and vegetables, less fat, fewer fried foods, more vitamins and fewer sodas.

So, I'm going on an "activities diet" in 2005. Sure, I still plan on coaching my youngest son's Little League team and teaching a class at church. But I'm taking a break from traveling sports teams. I've already got our family vacation dates on the August calendar. And I'm seeing to it that our family eats many more evening meals together in 2005.

I'm sure it won't be easy to keep this New Year's resolution. But I'm going to give it a good try. Because even though I don't particularly like going on a crash diet, it sure beats letting our home become merely a place where people crash at night.

And even if going on an "activities diet" never becomes the latest fad, I'm convinced that it will help me become a better dad.

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