

# Unstructured Time + Family + Nature = *Balance and Resiliency*

As vacations end and a new year of classes begins, families with school-age children and all those who serve them in our schools once again experience the mad rush into tight schedules that leave little room for reflection. We will miss the unstructured time that often reconnects us with friends and loved ones. Now we must rely on a summer-infused capacity to withstand the days when free minutes are so elusive.

Growing up in nearby Niles, I fondly remember our annual family trip to a small cabin just over the Wisconsin border. There were 10 tired cottages just down the shore from a resort lodge, each filled with families such as ours. We spent every day at the lake, swimming, building sandcastles, fishing, playing golf, or riding horses. This trip was the highlight of our summer and something we anticipated the entire school year.

Reflecting back, the real value in those summers at the cabin was not the beach, trail riding, fishing, or golf; it was the unstructured time our family spent together in an unspoiled environment. From the instant we awoke each morning, we were outside enjoying nature and the scenic Wisconsin lake. We sat down each evening to a family dinner without the distraction of TV, radio, computers, cell phones, or the Internet.

Those leisurely, carefree summers represent an unfamiliar era to this generation of students. Nevertheless, my brother, sister, extended relatives, and I still try to protect one week every summer to connect for a family getaway. While the rustic, lakeside cabins in Wisconsin are long gone, we reserve time each July to travel together to a vacation house in another serene setting, far from the traffic and disruptions in our hectic lives.

Escaping from the structured world is increasingly difficult. Although technology makes it so easy to connect, it can also prevent the healthy habit of periodically disconnecting. Case in point: While fishing in a remote area this summer, my Blackberry began its familiar vibrating, alerting me to the receipt of new e-mail. Fishing rod in one hand and Blackberry in the other, I quickly responded

to the e-mail and hit send, just as a trout hit my fly.

As I reflect on the paradox of that moment and on simpler childhood summers in Wisconsin, I agree with recent studies stating we need unstructured time with family, friends, and nature to develop a healthy resiliency in the face of stress. Strengthening parental bonds with children, particularly adolescents, is extremely important. Informal family time is the perfect opportunity to fortify or open lines of parent-child communication as the challenges of a school year quickly approach.

Research proves the principle means to keep children emotionally healthy, drug and alcohol free, and out of trouble is the amount of time they spend with their families. According to William Doherty, head of the Family Social Science Department at the University of Minnesota, recent studies\* show sharp declines in the number of conversations children have with family members, the number of dinners a typical family may share each week, and the lack of free time most families have for connecting. “A warm and limit-setting family is the most important element for kids and that requires a lot of time, time not spent running around,” said Doherty. “Children need time to daydream, to chill out.

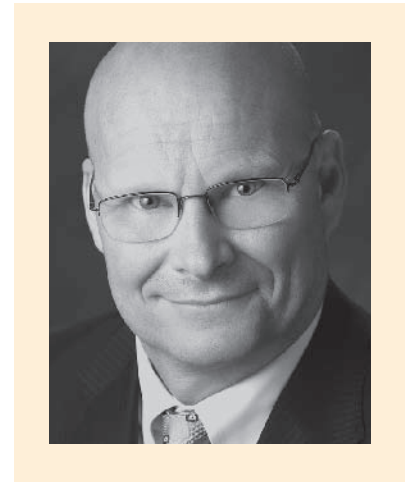


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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We’ve reversed it all.”

Hopefully, this summer your family found ways to reserve some unstructured time in the outdoors, apart from technology, with loved ones who support or depend on you throughout the year. As another school year starts — when the stress begins to build for students, teachers, and parents — I hope we will all look for occasions to turn off the machines, seek out nature (even if only for a few minutes of stargazing), and make time for those people most important in our lives. We must seek the stability and resiliency so necessary to fulfill the obligations of daily life.

At some point during this school year, when things start spinning a little faster than they should, I will close my eyes and think back to a time long ago. I will visualize my younger brother, Bob, running ahead along the trail leading to the stable. I will hear him yelling back at me, “Hurry up, we need to get good horses.” That image will help make everything right again in the world. I will smile and regain the balance to take on what needs my attention. U

*\*Doherty, William, Ph.D. (April 2005). Overscheduled kids, underconnected families: The research evidence. University of Minnesota*