

Commentary: Children and the Art of Friendship*

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We all seem to know that our lives are busier than they used to be. In the March 30, 2001 *World Tribune* Matilda buck stated, “In our high tech society, where speed and convenience are highly prized, we are seldom thinking about a five year plan or a 10 year plan. In America, we’ve got the five minute plan and the one minute manager.” This comment led to her point that “anything of value takes time to construct.” (p.4).

Personally I can think of nothing of greater value to “construct” or foster than the life of a child. No matter what great resources we have in the world, children are our most precious and valuable. It is for this reason that I have chosen to share some comments and review the book, *Good Friends Are Hard to Find* by Fred Frankel, PH.D.

It is increasingly common to see articles about the busy lives we lead – especially if we are raising children. Something appears on this topic at least once a week in my local newspaper. The January 29, 2001 *Newsweek* featured an article on *The Parent Trap*, its header stating “Raising children today is like competing in a triathlon with no finish line in sight. Days are filled with a mad scramble . . .” it later describes how parents are increasingly over structuring their children’s lives with activities and how some young children are even showing signs of burnout. It states, “What families risk losing in this insane frenzy, many parenting experts agree, is the soul of childhood and the joy of family life.” (p.51). William Damon, director of Stanford University’s Center for the Study of Adolescence, is quoted as saying. “These are supposed to be the years that kids wander around and pal around, without being faced with the pressures of the real world.” (p.51).

Clearly the faster life style is negatively impacting children in some ways. In my social work practice I am seeing increasing numbers of children who do not have a “best friend” or even close friendships. Their social lives revolve around group activities and friends of convenience, not friends chosen out of mutual likes and the deeper, unspoken qualities of connection. Often these children have a full schedule of team or group activities as well ,as music lessons, riding lessons, etc. However, they have little time or parental encouragement to take steps to deepen their relationships into friendships.

I believe that children who lack the time and encouragement to develop authentic friendships do not get the needed practice of interacting at an intimate level of personal contact. Close friends can teach us compassion, how to support each other and how to solve disagreements within a relationship. The lack of opportunity to develop sincere friendships in childhood can only inhibit a person’s intimacy skills as they mature into adulthood.

As adults who may to foster and encourage the healthy development of children, we need to take a broad perspective. We can help children and teens slow down and make time for and choose good friends. We can take our time to mentor them in the art of friendship. This will help root them more firmly in their own humanity, bringing both personal and communal rewards.

*Published in: California Society for Clinical Social Work *Clinical Update*, Vol. XXXI, No.11 (June 2001), pp. 7,10.

Please see book review: *Good Friends Are Hard to Find*, on this website.