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Sometimes it's
okay to ditch
the schedule
and simply
soak in the
moments with
your children.

Life in the Slow Lane

She belongs among the wildflowers.

BY CATHERINE RYAN GREGORY

On any given day, I work, putting in my hours writing at the computer. I take care of my two kids. I run the household. Some days, I even manage to shower.

I schlep the girls to gymnastics, play dates, moms' group and the grocery store. I listen to NPR in the background while I feed my preschooler breakfast; I put away dishes while the girls "play" (aka Edie growls as Maxine tries to crawl on and chew her older sister's books). And every so often I remember to breathe.

This multitasking litany isn't unique. Just about every American parent in the 21st century can say the same.

That's why — when our schedule allows for it — the quiet, still moments of parenthood are so precious.

On a recent morning that started all too early, thanks to Maxine's 5 am wake up, I took advantage of the head start to the day. The girls and I hiked at Camassia Natural Area in West Linn, which was teeming with wildflowers.

"I have a good idea," said Edie, my almost-3-year-old. "Let's explore and see what there is to see!"

It was, in fact, a brilliant idea. And since we walked the loop at her pace, we did see plenty.

While Edie paused to smell the blooms, I noticed a whole team of bumblebees hard at work. We talked about pollination and I pointed out the bees' yellow-dusted hind legs.

Maxine, my 9-month-old, reached her hands out. She was riding face-out in a carrier, so I leaned closer to a tree, and she brushed it with her fingertips. I did, too, feeling the rough bark and soft moss.

We had no agenda, besides taking a hike. We had all the time in the world to listen to the birds, touch the grass and wander — oops, no, stay on the trail! That's definitely poison oak over there.

The zen morning must have had a deep effect. Not only was I truly present in the moment, letting the experience wash over me like a refreshing stream, I also gave myself a break from the ever-present guilt over our usual (and more frenetic) pace.

After all, there's enough of that judgemental criticism out there. Browse through just about any parenting blog and you'll read critiques of our current way of raising kids. These range from a genuine wish to calm too-hectic schedules to tirades against all those overly busy moms and dads who are ruining the youngest generation.

Most of us don't enjoy a lifestyle that allows us to live every hour to a child's rhythm. Sometimes I check work emails while I push my kids on the swing. I pick up my baby before she gets to the dog's water bowl because I just can't handle changing her onesie again. I hurry our walks because we have someplace to be, and why oh why does it take so long to go a single block?

There's a place for slow parenting, and I applaud those families that adhere to the philosophy of letting kids explore the world at their own pace and without orchestrated activities. But that's not a realistic expectation for my family.

At least not all the time. But when we do manage to take it slow — if only for an hour or two — I really soak it in.

After all, you never know what you'll see: grasses swaying in the wind, flowers unfurling in the early sun, or even two young girls moving at their very own pace. ■

Catherine Ryan Gregory is a master multitasker who occasionally shuts down her monkey brain long enough to enjoy quiet moments hiking, playing with her two children or simply drinking a cup of hot tea. She blogs about the nutty ride of motherhood at TenThousandHourMama.com.

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