Book Review: Simplicity Parenting

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Title: Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids
Author: Kim John Payne, M. ED., with Lisa M. Ross
Publication Date: August 31, 2010
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Rating: 4.5 out of 5 Stars
Where To Find: Amazon or your library.

Book Description:

Today’s busier, faster society is waging an undeclared war on childhood. With too much stuff, too many choices, and too little time, children can become anxious, have trouble with friends and school, or even be diagnosed with behavioral problems. Now internationally renowned family consultant Kim John Payne helps parents reclaim for their children the space and freedom that all kids need for their attention to deepen and their individuality to flourish. Simplicity Parenting offers inspiration, ideas, and a blueprint for change:

- Streamline your home environment. Reduce the amount of toys, books, and clutter— as well as the lights, sounds, and general sensory overload.
- Establish rhythms and rituals. Discover ways to ease daily tensions, create battle-
free mealtimes and bedtimes, and tell if your child is overwhelmed.

- Schedule a break in the schedule. Establish intervals of calm and connection in your child’s daily torrent of constant doing.
- Scale back on media and parental involvement. Manage your children’s “screen time” to limit the endless deluge of information and stimulation.

A manifesto for protecting the grace of childhood, Simplicity Parenting is an eloquent guide to bringing new rhythms to bear on the lifelong art of raising children.

**My Review:**

This past spring, with just a 2nd grader and a preschooler, our family was drastically overscheduled. We were on the go almost every night of the week and sometimes we were even leaving activities early to go to other activities. We spent a lot of time with the family split up across multiple activities in the same night.

On top of the exhausting and unsustainable amount of overscheduling, we were also dealing with toy clutter and messy rooms, as well as the eternal balancing act of screen time.

So, when I heard Liz from The Frugalwoods recommend Simplicity Parenting on a podcast, I was intrigued. I checked the book out from the local library and read it during my “miracle morning” sessions last month.

This book starts with Why Simplify, which makes a convincing argument for why we should simplify our lives and approach to parenting. I didn’t really need any convincing but it was nice to read some validation from an expert for what I was already feeling. Next, after describing some of the symptoms we might recognize in our children from leading a complex life (what the book calls a Soul Fever) the book gets into the practical advice. This practical advice is divided up into four categories:

1. Environment
2. Rhythm
3. Schedules
4. Filtering Out the Adult World

Each one has a full chapter devoted and they all contain useful advice on how to go about simplifying in these different areas of life. A few examples: The “Environment” chapter outlines a 10-point checklist for identifying toys that should be discarded. The “Rhythm” chapter suggests having themed nights for family dinners (Monday is pasta night, Tuesday is soup night, etc). The “Schedules” chapter talks about how to choose an appropriate level of engagement with extracurricular activities and sports, and the power of boredom. And finally “Filtering Out the Adult World” discusses overexposing children to news/media and other adult concerns (screen time is a big topic here) as well as helicopter parenting.

Each chapter is 30-40 pages of anecdotes and practical how-to advice on simplifying
and how to choose where to simplify. Some of the chapters do seem to drag on a bit but overall, the advice is extremely valuable and I would recommend this book for anyone with kids.

Changes We've Implemented:

**Environment**

Using the suggestions in the book, we've put away (in the attic, for now) most of the toys and books that were in the kids’ rooms. As a result, the kids are able to clean their own rooms and the playroom, and they’ve started using toys, craft supplies, and books that they never touched before. The third grader started reading back through his Magic Treehouse books and actually finished a couple of them last week. Previously, he had so many books on his bookshelf that it was difficult to make a decision.

**Rhythm**

The biggest change we’ve made here is a firm bedtime at 8:00 pm. Both kids are in bed, and we are done with stories, tuck-ins, one last sip of water and both parents are back downstairs by 8:00 pm. The kids know this and know that if they want water, snuggles, stories or anything we need to fit it in before 8:00. This has helped a lot with dinner too because the kids want to make sure they finish dinner with plenty of time to fit in whatever else they want before bed. We’ve also implemented themed dinners, but that’s one we’ve only just started, so we’ll see how well that works out.

**Schedules**

I read this book during the summer when schedules are generally pretty calm, but I think we are going into the new school year with a much better plan. We’ve already decided NOT to sign up again for a few of the things we were doing last year. I think it was a big help that the kids were able to recognize how much more they enjoyed their time during the summer when they weren't overscheduled, so it is making it easier for them now to understand that they can have more enjoyment with fewer activities.

**Filtering Out the Adult World**

We have drastically reduced the amount of TV that is watched in our house. We don't watch any TV at all during the week and we limit to an hour or two total on the weekend, unless we decide to pop some popcorn and have a family movie night. Previously, the kids would each watch at least 1 or two shows a day, often unsupervised.

We’ve also started screening our own discussions in front of the kids to limit the number of adult discussions they hear that they don’t really need to hear. Current events, anything personally stressful that might be happening, etc.

**Results:**
We can already tell an incredible improvement in our quality of life from this simplification effort. The kids play together now and watch much less TV. They put on costumes and pretend, work on crafts, play outside in the yard, etc. A lot of time that they used to spend watching TV, fighting, complaining about having to clean up, etc. is now spent on activities that are bringing them closer together with each other and with us. They are much more creative and less passive, and both parents are considerably less stressed as well.

As I write this, both kids are sitting at the kitchen table, making up stories and drawing their own comic books. No one has asked to watch TV at all.

I’d say it’s a success to this point.

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