

The Right Balance in Life

We all struggle to find the right balance in life. Sometimes we work too much. Sometimes we play too much. Sometimes we sleep too much. In order to be productive and stay healthy we need to find the perfect mix of work, play and sleep. However, this is not always easy to achieve.

Two years ago I asked a boy in one of the junior forms to come and see me in my office. The Discipline Master had told me that this boy was regularly late to school in the mornings and that it was probably time for me to have a chat with him about his lateness. Prior to the meeting I looked at the boy's student record file and noticed that he lived very close to school. Indeed, by my calculations it should have taken him no more than 10 minutes to walk from his apartment to the College entrance on Bonham Road. Even if he left home as late as 8.00am he would still make it to school before the bell rang. This was a mystery I needed to solve.

On the day of the appointment the boy arrived at my office, thankfully on time. I started with the obvious question: *what time do you get out of bed?* He replied in a frank and honest way: *my alarm clock is set for 8.00am.* He added, *I rush to the bathroom, put on my uniform, take some food from the kitchen, pick up my school bag, and run to school.* Given the precise nature of these tasks and the fact that he had clearly worked out all the timings, I asked why then was he late to school. He told me that his schedule was sometimes '*unavoidably delayed*' if somebody else in his apartment building was using the lift or if the pedestrian traffic lights close to the school were red. But two minutes delay is a long time when a Prefect is standing in the entrance lobby waiting to take your name.

Our conversation moved on to why he needed to set his alarm clock to ring so late. My second question was as obvious as my first: *what time do you go to bed?* His reply was once again frank and honest; *I turn off my bedside light at 1.00am although at weekends it's often much later.* He agreed when I suggested that this was rather late, particularly on a school night, but he said that he had researched the topic sleep patterns on the internet. With some authority he informed me that teenage boys need 9 hours sleep per night. He went on to say that his schedule of 7 hours sleep (1.00am to 8.00am), whilst below that recommended, was only 2 hours less. He felt this was not unreasonable and that he possessed the physical and mental stamina to control the situation.

What he couldn't control, however, were the minus conduct marks clocked up each morning that he was late. He was a clever boy with good grades, no record of falling asleep in class and always on time with his homework. Yet he was headed fast toward an unsatisfactory conduct grade on his report. So why did he turn off the lights so late at night? He told me that he would sit down for an early dinner before starting homework that he would normally finish around 10.00pm. This left him a clear three hours to play computer games before his self-imposed curfew.

Clearly, this young lad had a problem balancing work, play and sleep. Seven hours sleep a night is not enough for a teenage boy particularly if he is energetic and active. Two hours less than the recommended sleep is a lot to miss particularly when this is a regular habit during a normal school week. To save himself from an unsatisfactory conduct grade he decided to make a few changes. His alarm clock was reset to 7.15am (although still hardly early) but more significantly the bedside light was turned off at 11.00pm on school nights. Although this meant forgoing 2 hours of computer games he had decided it was worth the sacrifice and certainly preferable to the pain he would endure from his parents should his end-of-year conduct grade be unsatisfactory.

Last year I caught up with the boy to see if he had kept to this new pattern of work, play and sleep. He told me that he had and was enjoying the benefits. He had time in the morning to take a shower and sit down to breakfast (although he still failed to make his bed). He even arrived at school early enough to play basketball with his classmates. Interestingly, he did not miss the computer games on weeknights although he did get 'stuck in' at the weekends. Most importantly he hadn't been taken to one side by a Prefect in the entrance lobby all year. And his parents were pleased!

Not all my conversations with boys about their behaviour have such a happy ending. But in this case the solution was simple, the pain minimal and the benefits great. It is important for each of us to strike a balance in our lives between work, play and sleep. We cannot afford for one to two to dominate. All play but no work or sleep is unhealthy, all work and sleep but no play is also unhealthy, all sleep but no work or play is definitely unhealthy!

Do you have the right balance of work, play and sleep?

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