



by Karen Stephens

Life in the Stands: Putting in Time for the Kids

During his growing years, our son was a joiner, a participator, a team player with a capital T. And we encouraged it. We felt group activities would help him become a well-rounded person with good social skills and friends. And extra-curricular activities, from sports to speech team, kept him busy and out of trouble. It consumed all the energy a growing boy had to burn.

But with his involvement came a rude awakening for me. His activities dominated my free time, too!

With Derek's active participation, I was handed the opportunity, the privilege, and the *obligation* to attend a flurry of events. There were holiday recitals, speech and math contests, soccer, football, basketball, and baseball games.

For years we scheduled family plans around Derek's extra-curricular activities and study needs. Our family wasn't alone in that time crunch. Many parent "regulars" put in time on the stands for the kids.

We'd sit for hours. Parents chatted between innings, quarters, halves, time-outs, speeches, songs, marches, or debate rounds. Basically we compared notes, sharing "You won't believe what my kid tried to pull on me!" stories. (It's an informal, but very effective support group!)

Time isn't the only sacrifice spectator-parents make. Comfort is sacrificed, too. The rule of thumb is that weather is at odds with outdoor school functions. Parents learn to brave the elements. During soccer and baseball games parents sit through downpours. Diehards sit through *wannabe tornado* thunderstorms. Football parents cheer through sleet and snow!

From math team to football, if it's a winning year, there are play-offs, tournaments, championships, and All-Star games. And there are the award banquets. It's all great for the kids' self esteem, and time-demanding for busy, but loyal parents.

Why do parents put in so much time watching their kids' events? Why didn't we do the grocery shopping instead? (And there's always the laundry to do and grass to mow!)

Parents attend to show their support, confidence, and pride in the kids' efforts and achievements. With camcorder in hand, they go to savor the little moments that loop from season to season, comprising kids' growing up years.

During 12 years of extra-curricular activities, our child grew into a man. The character traits, values, skills, and positive attitude we hoped he'd develop have bloomed.

He acquired a good work ethic. He learned to problem solve and implement decisions cooperatively. He learned to set goals and, even in the face of adversity, to maintain the determination required to achieve those goals. He learned to be successful.

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As an adult, our son continues to use what he learned in those early years. But now, it's not for play; it's for real. He's living the independent, responsible life we dreamed for him.

Without a child in school, I now find myself with no spectator responsibilities. I actually have some free time. It's a luxury to pursue things that interest me rather than my child.

For now, I've given my seat on the bleacher to another parent. As it should be. It's time for someone else to do time for their kids.

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But still, I'm wistful for my time in the stands. On warm summer nights, when I drive by a country baseball diamond, I hear childhood's voice rising above the cornfields chanting "hey-batta-batta-batta-batta-battAH!" It's then I ache for the days when we were soooo busy we didn't know if we were coming or going.

Yes, for now my time of rooting for the kids is over. But hopefully, it's just an intermission. My life in the stands could begin again with grandchildren

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.