

IT'S YOUR KiD

not a gerbil



Creating a
Happier &
Less-Stressed
Home

Dr. Kevin Leman

New York Times bestselling author of *Have a New Kid by Friday*

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT
It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil

“Dr. Kevin Leman is the go-to guy in our house for all things parenting. We’ve known Kevin for years, up close and personal, and we’ve seen the positive results of his parenting know-how with his own children. That’s why we were thrilled to see this book. We’ve got two little guys, and this book is sure to give us—and every other parent who reads it—an incredible advantage. Don’t miss out on this invaluable message.”

—DRS. LES AND LESLIE PARROTT

Founders of RealRelationships.com, authors of *Love Talk*

“Dr. Kevin Leman gives parents the challenge and the tools to raise healthy children in an unhealthy world. Parents will appreciate the humor and practicality of this book.”

—GARY D. CHAPMAN, PHD

Best-selling author of *The Five Love Languages of Children*

“Reads like a pep talk from a wise uncle. Dr. Kevin Leman gently encourages parents to remember that there’s no substitute for spending time with our kids, and when we do, we’re all happier as a family.”

—DR. GARY SMALLEY

Author of *Guard Your Child's Heart*

“*It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* brings astute psychology and an authentic life of parenting into a resourceful guide for modern-day parents. A must-read for parents looking to defuse the multitude of problems and challenges we face in our society today.”

—BOBBY APRIL

Special Teams Coach, Philadelphia Eagles

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IT'S TIME TO GET OFF THE WHEEL!

Have you ever seen gerbils running on a wheel inside their cage? They sure are intense little creatures, aren't they? And they look so industrious, too—constantly on the move, running with gusto around and around inside that silver circle.

But have you ever considered how tired and bored those little critters must get sometimes, doing the same thing over and over, day after day?

Let's be honest. Isn't that how you feel sometimes as you run from place to place, chauffeuring your children from one endless activity to another?

What if, for one moment, you could just step off the activity wheel . . . and relax? How would you feel then?

And what if that single moment could stretch into an hour, or even a whole day?

There once was a popular ad that featured a woman relaxing in a scented bath and saying, "Calgon, take me away!" If you're feeling as if you could use a little Calgon treatment, isn't it time you gave yourself permission to get off the activity wheel? So your kids can get off that wheel too?

Everybody thinks activities outside the home are good for kids. They help your child develop social networks, allow your child to

have new experiences, and even give your child a jump-start over other kids so that he or she will be more successful and even get into the right college . . . or so the reasoning goes.

But have you ever thought about what those activities really mean to your family's schedule and to your together time?

If you want to make a difference in your kid's life, then *you* need to be in your kid's life. No volleyball coach or piano teacher can take your place. And the time spent driving your SUV from point A to point B doesn't count.

I'll tell you a secret: If your kids could pick one person to spend time with, *it would be you*.

You, Mom or Dad. You're the most significant person in your child's life. You provide the loving environment, the security, and the sense of belonging that every child needs to mature into a healthy, well-balanced adult.

But if you're constantly running, you're handing your child's heart and time over to someone who doesn't know—or care—about your child nearly as much as you do.

So many parents today dilute their impact on their own kids because they have fallen for the “busy hands are happy hands” theory. Yet “an August 2003 poll for the Center for a New American Dream, an organization based in Takoma Park, Md., that focuses on quality-of-life issues, revealed that although 60% of Americans felt pressure to work too much, more than 80% wished for more family time and . . . 52% of them would take less money to get it.”¹

If you're among the 80 percent wishing for more family time (and my guess is that the percentage is even higher), you're reading the right book. *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* will give you practical solutions and helpful insights to get yourself off the activity wheel so that you can put your time and energies where they really count: establishing strong character and a love for home and family in your kids that will serve them well for a lifetime.

Years from now, when your daughter heads off to college or your son moves into his first apartment, and you say farewell with teary eyes, who do you want them to become? That dream begins by looking forward and carefully cultivating your relationship with your children. *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* will help you lay a firm foundation for a lifetime relationship with your children—kids who are nurtured at home by involved parents, who have downtime, who can say no to peer pressure because they know they belong to your family; kids who are reared for character and not just achievement and who value your faith and standards.

This book is all about that kind of relationship. It's about embracing what matters most and setting priorities to keep your home and family a top priority.

Not only is it doable, but you'll heave a sigh of relief along the way. You'll have more family laughter and less stress, and you'll build memories and relationships your kids will never forget—even when they have homes and families of their own.

You'll never have to think about keeping up with the Joneses again. (Who gave them the right to set the pace for all of us in the first place, I'd like to know?)

Why not live the way you really want to live?

Today's a great day to start.

IT'S YOUR KID, NOT A GERBIL!

*Are you unwittingly upping the ante
on your kids—and yourself?*

Remember that little gerbil we just talked about? The critter running on the wheel in his cage? I want you to look at him very, very closely. He's running . . . and running . . . and running . . . and . . . running. His heart is going a mile a minute. He's working away, intent on going as far and as fast as he can.

But guess what? That gerbil isn't going anywhere! He can run as hard and as long as he wants, but he'll still be stuck running around on that same wheel day after day, month after month, and perhaps even years, with no end in sight.

That's the state of most kids in America today.

I was recently in a dentist's waiting room and watched a scene play out that's becoming more and more familiar.

A teenage son and his mother entered the waiting room. Both were on their cell phones. The mom was making arrangements, from what I overheard, with a co-worker, to take care of the details of a project while she took her son to the dentist. The son was mute . . . and busy texting. He looked up twice at his mom, as if trying to get her attention, but she was still talking.

So I watched, from my front-row seat next to the son, while he texted his mother: *How long will this take?* When the mother finished talking, she looked at her phone and, rather than answering her son, texted him back: *45 min.*

And they were both right across the room from each other!

Most kids today can text faster than a woodpecker with ADHD. But do they have the relational skills that will bring them satisfaction and fulfillment in life?

David Elkind, author of the groundbreaking books *The Hurried Child* and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, says,

The pressure to grow up fast, to achieve early is very great in middle-class America. There is no room today for the “late bloomer.” Children have to achieve success early or they are regarded as losers.¹

And parents today are driven to make their children “winners.” Where did this drive come from?

Take a Little Trip Down Memory Lane . . .

More has changed during the past fifty years than you think, and it has everything to do with how you parent.

Take a look at the 1950s, for instance—the decade of great optimism. Ads from the day that depicted the future showed men and women lounging on the decks of antigravity homes and smiling as they boarded air buses. Back then, people believed that technology would make life a breeze, freeing up more leisure time to spend together.

But is that really what happened? Seems to me that instead of using technology to our advantage, we let technology take advantage of us. Even with all our time-saving inventions, our pace of life has

increased. Check out the magazine articles on squeezing the most out of every second, including how to lose weight faster, find the most healthy fast food, and make friends faster. They're all aimed at our "instant" world.

Time, once valued less than money, is now valued *more* than money. While people used to sacrifice time to save money, now they sacrifice money to save time. We pay top dollar for express mail, home grocery delivery service, and one-hour photo development.

And just who do you think is watching? Your kids! What they see Mom or Dad do, they'll also do. (Even if they say during the teenage years that they don't want to be anything like you, guess what? The apple doesn't fall far from the tree!)

Children will always follow your lead. If you are constantly on the go, with a to-do list whose weight would kill an elephant, your children will see that. Interestingly, one study found that time spent on homework more than doubled for six- to eight-year-olds between 1981 and 1997.² At Toys"R"Us online, you can even buy PDAs (personal digital assistants) for kids to schedule homework between soccer practice and Cub Scouts. To me, the idea that an elementary-school child would need this is, simply, frightening.

Kids today are stressed at every turn, inundated with material things and experiences in such rapid-fire motion that it would be impossible for them to keep up. As a result, there's increasing concern from teachers, youth leaders, and others who work with children, because more and more kids are feeling burned out by their late teens. Claire, a ten-year-old, told her counselor at school,

I can never do enough to make my parents happy. They always want more. Mom wants me to make more friends. My dad wants me to be a better student. All I want is to sit by myself in my room and dream sometimes . . . without having to go anywhere.

Claire, by the way, is almost a straight-A student, plays the flute, is on the soccer team at school, is involved in 4-H, takes care of her kindergarten brother for two hours after school until her parents get home, and sometimes even makes dinner for the family.

Superkid—or Superstressed?

The first time you looked into your child's eyes, what did you see?

If you're like most parents, you saw potential . . . and the fulfillment of your dreams. *This kid*, you thought to yourself, *is going to be the best kid ever. Oh, the things she is going to accomplish!*

From that moment on, it's easy to fall into the trap of upping the ante on your child and yourself. The tendency, *especially* for first-time parents, is to try to create a superbaby or supertoddler. So you enroll your child in ballet, play groups, gymnastics, and many other activities—all in the name of good physical activity and “socialization.” But it's sort of like reserving a church for your daughter's wedding before she's old enough to date. You're getting way ahead of yourself!

First things first. The most important thing you can do for your child is to allow him or her time to bond with you. Bonding doesn't happen in a day or a month . . . or even a year. It's a slow, steady process based on love, commitment, and time. The more you strengthen that bond between you and your child—by doing fun things together, by playing in the park together, by holding hands with each other—the more you'll create a lifelong bond.

The time of early childhood is precious—kids are so imaginative and such a blast. They're just thrilled to have your attention. Did you know, Mom, that you walk on water in a toddler's eyes? And did you know, Dad, that you are the “biggest, toughest daddy in the whole world,” even if you can't bench-press eighty pounds in your wildest dreams? In the eyes of your son or daughter, you are the center of the world.

So don't rush it. Don't up the ante by running from place to

place to keep a schedule or by forcing constant socialization with other children through multiple activities. All too soon your child is going to enter preschool or kindergarten and develop other friends outside your family circle. Instead of playing with your child, you'll be watching your child play with someone else. So why hurry the process along? Enjoy the ride—with your child!

And did you know that you're not a rotten parent if you don't enroll your child in preschool? Nobody in my generation went to preschool, and we (at least most of us) seem to be doing just fine. Who says you have to do certain things? Don't fall into the trap of doing what's considered "normal." Why would you want "normal" anyway? If you want a normal child, just look around someday when you're strolling through the mall. You'll find plenty of toddlers throwing tantrums by the carousel horse ride when Momma won't shell out the bucks, preteens sassing their mothers in front of Claire's boutique, and teens giving their parents the eye roll . . . and walking twenty steps behind to make sure they can't be faintly connected to their families. *That's* normal. Is that really what you want?

I didn't think so.

Many people talk as if your kids will be outcasts for life if you don't start them early in a variety of programs to stretch their bodies, minds, and social skills. Having a friend over to play when your child is three years or younger can be a fun experience, but play groups and play experiences are, in my opinion, vastly overrated. What's far more important is what's happening between you and your child.

If you resist the trend to sign up for everything in sight, you and your child will be better off. In other words, don't sign up your two-year-old for tap dancing because you're worried she doesn't seem very social. Believe me, your child will have plenty of time to socialize with other kids when she's in school. (And you'll have plenty of time to

**Resist the trend to
sign up for everything
within sight.**

socialize with other parents during all the school activities in the classroom and on field trips.) How your child will relate to those other children will have everything to do with how much she has bonded with you—and how comfortable she feels with herself as a result.

Besides, just wait. By the time your daughter is thirteen, she'll be so social it'll drive you crazy. Every time you pick up the phone, you'll have to suffer through two girls talking—and giggling away—about the secrets of who they think likes whom and who said something *really* dumb in class.

As children get into the school years, they will naturally socialize and develop relationships. Peers will become increasingly important as your child grows. His activity level outside the home will increase each year—and so will yours! After all, who drives him from point A to point B?

So why hurry up the pace any more by upping the ante on yourself and your child? Give yourself and your child quiet downtimes to breathe, to laugh, to take a nap, to just stare out the window, to walk through the fall leaves. There's a big difference between having to run on the activity wheel at times and having to run on it *all the time*, never able to get off. One can be exhilarating; the other is exhausting.

If you're always looking harried and acting stressed from too many activities, if you're constantly talking on your cell phone and running to keep up with an overly busy schedule, and if you're constantly late, what are you teaching your child?

That kind of life is frantic and no fun. You have to simply run on the wheel, like that poor gerbil, and you're never able to get off. Is that really the message you want your child to grow up with?

"The Same Thing"—a Good Thing?

I'll make you a deal. Drive into your average elementary-school parking lot for a minute. If you'll give me a five-dollar bill for every

SUV and minivan in the parking lot, I'll give you a twenty-dollar bill for every other kind of car. Who do you think will come out ahead on that one? I bet I will, by far. You know why?

We humans tend to act like clones.

Because we humans tend to act like clones. We watch what others are doing, and then we do the same thing. It's part of our human longing for connection, for acceptance. But sometimes "the same thing" isn't a good thing.

Most kids are pushed too hard today. Parents want their kids to be number one at everything they do. If one of their kids comes in second in anything, parents are apt to enroll that child in a special program or give him or her private tutoring and individual lessons to maintain the illusion that their child really is superior in all things.

One of my daughters and her husband are both schoolteachers. Some of the kids who come to their classes are average in intelligence and get average grades—but that's not good enough for Mom and Dad. They create all kinds of waves trying to squeeze something out of their child that just isn't there. But every child is unique—not just another gerbil in a litter. And that child should be treated as unique. Thank goodness we're not all the same! Can you imagine what a boring world that would be?

If you accept your child as she is—and accept that she isn't going to excel at everything—you get both yourself and your child off the endless wheel of expectations.

Just because your neighbor's daughter gets straight As in every subject, does that mean your daughter should, especially if she's an average student?

And just because your best friend's son is involved in five after-school activities a week, does that mean yours should be?

So many of the stresses children face today involve living up to their parents' expectations—and keeping up with running from activity to activity. Your child doesn't need to keep up with the Jones

child or the Smith child, or anybody else. But what she does need is a loving parent who can help her discover her uniqueness and her role in the world.

So, parent, don't sell yourself short! You can make a tremendous difference in your kid's life. Offering encouraging and loving words, laughing together, reading together, having meals together, trying new things, and discussing ideas are more important than putting your kid on that gerbil wheel and watching her go around and around and around . . . and get nowhere.

Every kid—even though they're all hedonistic, me-oriented creatures by nature—wants to be part of a family. *Your* family. And home is the place where your child longs to be the most—yes, even when she doesn't act like it.

Think of it this way. When you've been away on a trip, and you're tired, exhausted, and hungry, what's the first thing you think of?

Hey, I think I'll stop by Taco Bell, get a meal deal, and hang out for a while.

Probably not. Most likely, it'll be, *Boy, I can't wait to get home, even if all we have is cereal.*

That same yearning lies within your child. So why not let her be a kid—and not a gerbil? Let her get off the endless wheel . . . and settle in to the comfort of home.

And when you get right down to it, wouldn't *you* rather be home chatting with your daughter over hot cocoa and just-baked cinnamon rolls instead of driving through Starbucks and McDonald's on your way to your second activity of the night? (A hint for those of you who are baking challenged: Swiss Miss and the Pillsbury Doughboy can kick a quiet evening off to a good start!)

You have everything to gain—and nothing to lose—by getting off the activity wheel.

In ten or twenty years, your child won't speak fondly of being driven around town between Girl Scouts, soccer, and gymnastics.

But she will remember with great joy the weekly family pizza night, the Saturday-night Clue games, the Sunday-afternoon movie time, and the warm cookies cooling on the rack when she came home from school.

Good Question!

What kinds of memories do you want your child to have of you, his or her growing-up years, and your home?

How to Get Off the Activity Wheel

- Resist the trend to try to do everything.
- Decide what's best for your family . . . and stick to it.
- Choose activities carefully. Keep life simple.
- Block out time in your schedule just to be home . . . together.

