



"I'll Pencil You In" — The Overscheduled Child¹

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Introduction

In a world where being busy is the norm for most individuals, today's children are no exception. In addition to school, children have a multitude of extracurricular activities and are often jumping from one activity to another. Many parents feel that they should keep their child(ren) involved in activities, and doing so will keep them out of trouble. However, an over-worked, over-stressed child may face alternative problems versus one who has nothing to do.

A child's after school weekly schedule may look like the following:

- Monday- Karate
- Tuesday- Music lessons
- Wednesday- Dance
- Thursday- Voice lessons
- Friday- Youth group
- Saturday- Basketball

As full as it appears, this schedule does not include hours of practice needed for each activity.

Nor does it include school, homework, family time, or down time. So, with schedules such as this, one question remains: "Are our children overbooked?"

Research has shown that children involved in extra-curricular activities are less likely to be involved in risky behavior and have higher motivation for achievement. However, some children are over-involved in activities and may experience stress, anxiety, and burnout. Parents must intervene and help their children regulate activity involvement and break time to enjoy childhood.

Breaking Point: When Enough is Enough

How do parents recognize that their child is over-scheduled? Research has shown that increases in daily activities lead to higher levels of stress. Bouncing from one activity to another has left many children overwhelmed, stressed, and tired. Here are some questions to ask, to determine whether a child is overscheduled:

- Does the child go from one activity to another with little or no enthusiasm?

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- Is the child having trouble sleeping at night?
- Does the child complain of not having enough time to spend with their friends?
- Is the phrase “hurry up or we'll be late” used excessively?
- When did the child last participate in “quality” family time?
- Does your child have time to explore different interests (other than activities) that they may have?

Answering these questions can determine whether a child is over-scheduled, and if he or she is just following a routine their parents have set forth.

Research has shown an overbooked child leads to a less active teenager. Simply put, over-scheduled children become burned out later in life. Research also suggests that children who have played a sport with intensity for an extended period of time eventually tire of the activity as it becomes routine and just something to pass time, while the love of the sport is lost. The problem with these children is the vast number of activities replaces the experience they have with each. It becomes a struggle between quantity and quality. After burnout, children lose the desire to participate in other activities during later adolescent years and may become idle.

Tips for Keeping a Child Active but Not Over-scheduled

Reduce the amount of activities

Have the child choose a few activities that interests him. Researchers suggest a child pick one sport event, one social activity, and one artistic activity (Kirchheimer, 2004). If he or she really enjoys more than one sport, encourage choosing seasonal sports, which provide alternating schedules. Social activities, such as Boy/Girl Scouts or 4-H, provide constant interaction with peers. This constant interaction offers a stable social community, which is positive for child development. Lastly, the artistic components foster creativity and mental exercise.

Increase family time

Family is an essential foundation for the healthy development of a child, but overscheduling encroaches on family time due to conflicting schedules and lack of downtime. Like adults, children need the opportunity to relax. After work and school, afternoon and evening activities begin. For most families, time spent together occurs during car rides home or from getting ready for one activity and moving to another. So instead of enrolling your child in a second or third organized activity, try putting a family meal on the schedule.

Cheer, not criticize

Parents are guilty of yelling at their child to make the goal, catch the ball, and shoot the basket. What they do not realize is the immense pressure they are putting on the child. Instead of yelling at them to do something, encouraging the child to have fun or congratulating them is more beneficial. Children complain that the parent yelling puts them in a position of not wanting to disappoint their parent. Parents can step back and ask themselves how they would like it if their boss were constantly yelling at them to turn that report in or win that case.

Conclusion

Overall, parents have to let their children be children. Over-scheduling a child can have an adverse affect in the long run. While the research says extracurricular activities provide a positive outlet for children and lower the likelihood of risky behavior, over-scheduling a child introduces other stress factors that might potentially lead to a burned-out child.

Online Resources

Is Your Child Too Busy?

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/growth/growing/child_too_busy.html

Zander, A. (2007). *The scheduled child—Too many activities can affect family life*. Colorado State University Extension.

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/columncc/cc030325.html>

Additional Resources

Rosenfeld, A., Wise, N. & Coles, R. (2001). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper parent trap*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

References

Anderson, J. (2005). *Democratic community initiatives: The case of the overscheduled child*. *Family Relations* 54(5), 654-665.