

From the Health Clinic



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Is Your Child Too Busy?

"She's not really good at soccer and she doesn't really like it, but all her friends are doing it."

"If I miss a practice, even for a doctor's appointment, I get benched."

"If my son did not have an after-school activity every day of the week, he would sit around eating junk and playing video games."

"I don't really like lacrosse, but I have to do it because it'll look good on my college application."

"She *wants* to take gymnastics, art, dance, and cooking, and she goes to afternoon religious school twice a week. I'm not pushing her."

These are typical explanations and complaints from children and parents. Clearly, some children have too much to do and not enough time to do it. And it is hard to tell if it is due to parents pushing or children trying to keep up with their peers.

Whatever the reason, one thing's for sure - something's got to give. Is *your* child too busy?

Why Are Children So Busy?

For some families, kids may be driving the schedule because they do not want to feel left out. Teens may feel pressure to boost their roster of activities to get into the college of their choice.

Some parents feel it is more productive to keep their children constantly occupied rather leave free time for playing, exploring, and learning on their own. They might also feel that their children will miss out on key experiences if they are not doing what other children are.

But most parents usually just want what seems best for their children. Even when intentions are good, though, children can easily become overscheduled. The pressure to participate in a handful of activities all the time and to "keep up" can be physically and emotionally exhausting for parents and kids alike.

Of course, organized activities and sports are beneficial, too. They foster social skills and are opportunities for play and exercise. They teach sportsmanship, self-discipline, and conflict resolution. Most of all, they are fun! The key is to keep them that way and ensure that children - and parents - are not overwhelmed.

Signs That Children Are Too Busy

Sooner or later, children who are too busy will begin to show signs. Every child is different, but overscheduled children may:

- feel tired, anxious, or depressed
- complain of headaches and stomachaches, which may be due to stress, missed meals, or lack of sleep

- fall behind on their schoolwork, causing their grades to drop

Over scheduling can also take a toll on children's' friendships and social lives. Family life also can suffer - when one parent is driving to basketball practice and the other is carpooling to dance class, meals are missed. As a result, some families rarely eat dinner together, and may not take the extra time to stay connected.

Plus, the weekly grind of driving children all over the place and getting to one class, game, or practice after another can be downright tiresome and stressful for parents.

Tips for Busy Families

Even those parents who try to help their children cut back on some activities can run up against coaches who will not tolerate absences and children who want to keep up with their friends. However, it is important for parents to step back and make sure that their children are not burning out.

The key is to schedule things in moderation and choose activities with a child's age, temperament, interests, and abilities in mind. If something is too advanced, the experience is likely to be frustrating. If it is not engaging, children will be bored. And when children do something only to please their parents, it defeats the whole purpose.

Depending on a child's age and interests, it is possible to set reasonable limits on extracurricular activities and make them more enjoyable for all.

Here are some simple suggestions:

- **Agree on ground rules ahead of time:** For instance, plan on children playing one sport per season or limit activities to two afternoons or evenings during the school week.
- **Know how much time is required:** For example, will there be time to practice between lessons? Does your child realize that soccer practice is twice a week, right after school until dinnertime? Then there is the weekly game, too. Will homework suffer?
- **Keep a calendar to stay organized:** Display it on the refrigerator or other prominent spot so that everybody can stay up-to-date. And if you find an empty space on the calendar, leave it alone!

- **Even if children sign up for the season, let them miss one or two sessions:** Sometimes taking the opportunity to hang out on a beautiful day is more important than going to one more activity, even if you have already paid for it.
- **Try to carpool with other parents to make life easier.**
- **Try to balance activities for all of your children - and yourself:** It hardly seems fair to spend time and energy carting one to activities, leaving little time for another. And take time for yourself, to do the things you enjoy, and to spend time together as a family.
- **Create family time:** If you are eating pizza on the run every night, plan a few dinners when everyone can be home at the same time - even if it means eating a little later. Schedule family fun time, too, whether it is playing a board game or going on bike ride or hike.
- **Set priorities:** School should come first. If children have a hard time keeping up academically, they may need to drop an activity.
- **Know when to say no:** If your child is already doing a lot but *really* wants to take on another activity, discuss what other activity or activities need to be dropped to make room for the new one.
- **Remember the importance of downtime:** Everyone needs a chance to relax, reflect on the day, or just do nothing.

Slow It Down

Take a moment and think about your child's life. If it is hectic, sit down together and decide where you can cut back. If it is overly structured, set aside time for blowing off some steam.

Riding a bike, taking a walk, playing a game, listening to music, or just doing nothing for a while can give children some much-needed downtime. And never forget how important it is for children to simply get together to play. Children need time to just be kids.



"Tommy can't play now, but he might be able to squeeze you in between soccer and his piano lesson."