

## Over-scheduled Children?

Dance lessons, ball games, piano lessons, 4-H, scouts, homework - before we know it, it's bath time and past bedtime. Where does the time go? We as adults are busy with the daily responsibilities of our own in our fast-paced society. Microwaves help prepare quick meals, drive throughs provide food on the run and while an occasional evening of "running" is okay, a lifestyle of being on the run all the time can be very stressful for children. Sometimes it is essential to plan some "home time" or "down time" where there are no plans, no pushing, and no hurrying - just time to be together, relax and play.

I was teaching a parenting class in Higginsville last week and the Father of a first grader was concerned that her six-year-old daughter was already overscheduled. He explained to the group that, in first grade, she was supposed to read aloud 15 minutes a night. Her teacher had indicated that she was a "low-reader" and needed extra help. He acknowledged that she couldn't keep up with girls scouts, dance and soccer and still have time to read 15 minutes before falling into bed exhausted.

Millions of children across America feel overwhelmed and pressured. Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., a child psychiatrist and author of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap*, believes that enrolling children in too many activities is a nationwide problem. "Overscheduling our children is not only a widespread phenomenon, it's how we parent today," he says. "Parents feel remiss that they're not being good parents if their kids aren't in all kinds of activities. Children are under pressure to achieve, to be competitive."

Sometimes parents push children into activities and programs because of their desire to have them involved, not necessarily based on the child's desire to be involved. Community opportunities such as sport teams, art classes, computer classes, and other enrichment opportunities can be an asset to a child or a stressor if they deprive them of developmentally appropriate activities and play. What children learn through their play experiences builds the foundation for learning the "academics" during the school year.

What can you do to counteract over-scheduling?

- Protect family time. Set aside dinner times as non-negotiable family time or plan weekly game night or weekend afternoons together. Doing things together as a family helps provide bonding, stability and security for your children – three important elements of a family.
- Talk with your child. Before signing your child up for the next season, talk with them and ask a few questions: What is your favorite thing about this (class, sport, event)? What do you wish you had more time to do? Why do you want to be involved in this? What are you willing to give up in order to have time to be involved? After the discussion, review his or her answers and evaluate the true desire or lack thereof to guide you in making future plans.
- Carefully consider the value of sports. Like adults, American children desperately need exercise. Involvement in sports activities can provide important and positive experiences but over-involvement

and intense competition can be unnecessary stressors for children. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children should not focus on a single sport until they reach adolescence, and then they should be carefully monitored so that they do not become overly obsessed or stressed.

- Encourage some “nothing” time. Many experts recommend that children not be involved in more than two activities at any one time. Children (and their parents) need down-time: time that is unplanned and open for relaxation, thinking and talking. This time works best when there is no distraction from the television, computer, video games or the telephone.

We all want the best for our kids, and many of us see early involvement as the way to give our kids a head start in a competitive world. When you find yourself drowning in carpools and a crowded calendar, you’re not alone. It’s so easy to overload your kids on activities because it all sounds so good. But be realistic about what is important and really look at your family’s schedule. Ease up and scale back so your child isn’t overscheduled.

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