



WISE-MINDED PARENTING

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The Myth of the Overscheduled Child

by **Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D.**

Lately it's very much in vogue to criticize parents for overscheduling their kids. But the "overscheduled child" epidemic has been declared a myth, because only a small fraction of children participate in more than twenty hours of extracurricular activity (Mahoney et al. 2006). Some children are "overscheduled" relative to their appetites for organized activities, but in truth the average participation level is about five to seven hours a week. Compare that to the average time spent using various screens for social media or entertainment — more than seven hours per day! — and you can see that overscheduling is hardly the risk it's often made out to be.

The real issue, aside from the amount of screen time kids engage in these days, is that 40 percent of children partake in no extracurricular activities, and this disadvantaged group is of much greater concern than those teens who participate in excess.

Parents should take a hard line against kids' natural resistance to participate in sports, music, Scouts or service. True, some children are anxious, socially awkward or resistive to novel or unfamiliar experiences, but many are just throwing up roadblocks so they can engage in the less taxing and more hedonistic pursuits of hanging out, media entertainment or going free range with other footloose teens.

Allowing children to dictate an after-school, activity-deficient schedule is a big mistake. Organized youth activities do a lot of the heavy lifting of promoting positive development outside the home. Controlled, longitudinal studies have shown that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with school completion, adult employment and adult civic participation. Research has also shown that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with psychological health, thriving and flourishing.

A whole cadre of psychologist researchers has studied the character strengths developed by youth engaged in organized activities. They promote initiative, teamwork, self-control, positive relating, empathy and other character strengths. Using a standard youth inventory measure with a diverse sample of 2,280 eleventh graders, Reed Larson at the University of Illinois and his colleagues found that youth reported all of these positive experiences to occur significantly more often in youth programs than during school classes.

Not only do organized activities build character strengths, they decrease problem behaviors. During middle school, behavioral risk taking revs up, along with the impulsivity and sensation-seeking associated with this age, as hormones rage and the teenaged brain remodeling process begins.

Furthermore, decades of research have demonstrated the link between adult supervision and adolescent health and safety. Structured, after-school activities offered by schools are often offered free of charge and help kids "bond" to the school, increasing academic achievement. And even if parents empty their pockets for community-based activities, it's a worthy investment; longitudinal research conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota has documented a link between unstructured time and teen risk-taking problems. Generally speaking, a more positive group of peers is available at organized activities compared to the ones hanging out in the streets or in front of screens.

Organized activities promote character, build talents and skills, keep children safe and healthy, and prevent harmful risk taking, so why don't all parents make after-school activities as ubiquitous as WiFi, smartphones and laptops?

There are several reasons. Parents often cave to their children's wishes, thinking that they should give greater autonomy to their tweens and teens. They should! But they should let the tween or teen choose which activity, not



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whether. Do we make dental care elective? Given the benefits of physical, social and emotional health, we shouldn't make after-school activities elective, either.

Regardless of reasons for a child's activity boycott — to avoid challenge or to seek unfettered freedom, perhaps — a child who moves off the track of participation in healthy activities often finds it difficult to hop back on. Many of the troubled kids I see in psychotherapy dropped out of sports by sixth grade; by tenth grade, their "tats and tudes" don't mix with the golf team or student council, or maybe even drama club.

Parents also fall prey to "the stress mill," a side effect of treadmill life that can cripple even the most well-intentioned and loving parent. Parents have a tough time organizing their lives for the nightmarish labyrinth of their kids' schedules. It's easier to let your child just come home after school than it is to mess with carpools, or negotiating with your boss. Plus, kids are good at convincing their parents that they need to hang out and relax after school, even if what they are really doing is plugging into that average of 7.5 hours of screen exposure per day.

Which brings us back to the "overscheduled child syndrome," also known as hyper-parenting, over-parenting and helicopter parenting, which is often used as a defense by the well-meaning parents of underscheduled kids. Research by psychologist Joseph Mahoney of Yale University has documented that only 6 percent of teens are considered overscheduled, engaging in more than twenty hours of organized activities per week. What is truly alarming is the nearly 40 percent who do exactly zero.

While I have seen plenty of those overscheduled types in my clinical practice, the media has exaggerated the scope of this problem of mostly upper-income society, and under-featured the risks associated with the underscheduled, less fortunate children and teens. Sensationalistic tales related to the plights of the rich are more gripping to read than the disadvantages of the poor.

A widely cited 2009 report issued by the Institute of Medicine alerted healthcare practitioners of the critical importance of nurturing environments for the healthy development of children. Costly and harmful behavioral and psychological disorders can be prevented, the report asserted, but the next big challenge in our society is to translate this knowledge into practice, policy and programs.

Schools represent a wildly under-appreciated potential resource for children who need safe and nurturing settings in the after-school hours. With most parents at work (or looking for it), after-school activities on the school campus make sense. Imagine a clearinghouse of options, including peer tutoring, sports, arts, service — maybe even kitchen-garden maintenance and cooking. Given the risk taking that kids can engage in between 3 and 6 p.m. and the stress parents experience trying to monitor their kids' lives during those vulnerable hours, why do we act like we still live in the 1800s, when kids rushed home at 3 p.m. to help on the farm? School dismissal in the mid-afternoon is so "last century."

As the dog days of summer transition to manic panic about back-to-school planning, parents may dread the blitzkrieg of organizing schedules for after-school activities, and the loud resistance of their kids. But they should think twice before caving in. The expense and effort required to get children into regular after-school activities — at least one sport at all times — pays off in happier, healthier and ultimately — and almost certainly — more successful children.

About Laura S. Kastner, Ph.D.

Dr. Kastner is co-author of a number of parenting books, including the acclaimed *Getting to Calm: Cool-Headed Strategies for Parenting Tweens and Teens*. She is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington.

Her latest book, *Wise-Minded Parenting: 7 Essentials for Raising Successful Tweens + Teens* is available at wisemindedparenting.com.