

Tips for Busy Families

Organized activities can provide great opportunities for a child to have fun, get exercise, socialize, and pick up valuable skills.

But sometimes a child can have *too* much to do. Kids need regular doses of downtime - unscheduled time when they can relax, play, and explore on their own.

When kids are too busy, they can feel overwhelmed. And family life can suffer too. When everyone is running in many different directions, a family can end up missing out on valuable time together.

If your child is too busy, you may start to notice some signs. He or she may:

- seem tired, increasingly anxious, or depressed
- complain of headaches and stomachaches
- miss meals
- have trouble sleeping
- fall behind on schoolwork

Everyone feels like this once in a while. But if your child seems to be feeling this way constantly, a jam-packed schedule may be the culprit.

Here are some ways that you can set reasonable limits on your child's extracurricular activities so that they are a better fit for the entire family.

Helping Your Busy Child Cut Back

If you think your child is overscheduled, sit down together and decide where you can cut back. If your child's weekdays are very structured - with school, after-school activities, and homework - figure out how you can create some time within that structure for your child to relax and blow off a little steam.

When you're signing your child up for activities, try to schedule things in moderation and choose activities with your child's age, temperament, interests, and abilities in mind. Something too advanced may be frustrating while something that isn't engaging will probably be boring. And if your child doesn't want to do it in the first place, he or she may do it only to please you, which defeats the whole purpose.

Here are some other steps you can take to help head off activity overload:

- **Agree on some ground rules before you sign up for too much.** For instance, plan to play one sport per season, or limit activities to two afternoons or evenings during the school week.
- **Before you say yes, make sure your child knows how much time is required for an activity.** 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's the weekly game too. Will homework suffer?
- **Keep a calendar to stay organized.** Display it on the refrigerator or other prominent spot in the home so that the whole family can stay up-to-date. And if you find an empty space on the calendar, leave it alone!
- **Even if your child's signed up for the season, let him or her 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've 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 expend time and energy carting one kid to activities, leaving little time for another. And don't forget to take time for yourself, to do the things you enjoy, and to spend time together as a family.
- **Create family time.** If it seems like you're eating pizza on the run every night, make a plan so that everyone can be home for dinner at the same time - even if it means eating a little later. Make sure to schedule family fun time too, whether it's playing a board game together or going on bike ride or hike.
- **Set priorities.** School should come first. A child who is having a hard time keeping up academically may need to drop an activity.
- **Know when to draw the line.** If your child is already doing a lot and *really* wants to participate in another activity, talk about what needs to be dropped to make that happen.

And never forget how important it is for kids to simply get together to play. Kids need time to just be kids.

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