

Overscheduled and Out of Balance

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Imagine... This year, your daughter is playing soccer, because you know team sports help kids learn sportsmanship, teamwork, and commitment. Plus it's good exercise. That involves training one evening a week, with a game on the weekend. She's also enrolled in a theatre class because honestly, that child came out of the womb a drama queen, and you know it's one of the highlights of her week. Then there's piano lessons, which she's more ambivalent about but which you're keen for her to continue. Now her best friend is moving to a different school, but together they've figured out a Brilliant Idea – what if they both enrolled in the local Scout Troup? Then they could see each other every week! And you're so proud of them for making the best of the situation, but you kind of also want to cry because ANOTHER ACTIVITY? I mean, we haven't even gotten started on the list of Kid #2's extra-curriculars...

Or maybe you're not yet at the primary school stage. Your toddler does gymnastics Monday, music & movement Tuesday, swimming lessons Wednesday, they're at daycare on Thursday, and then there's mother's group on Fridays. You know that the first two years of life are a crucial time of brain development and laying down neural pathways, so you're determined to get in plenty of sensory-rich experiences.

Any of that sound familiar? It's so easy to fill up our family schedules with activity. We want to provide our children with opportunities to find and develop their gifts and interests. They're born as little bundles of possibility and potential, and we want to keep the world as wide open for them as possible, for as long as we can. Our fears whisper horrible possibilities – what if one day the difference between them getting their dream job or not is whether they can speak Japanese? What if they could have developed a treatment for depression that has a 100% success rate, if only you'd enrolled them in that science camp? Better be safe and sign them up for both.

And in reality? Each one of those activities is a Good Thing. Each one encourages and supports the growth of various traits and skills. Each one is coming from a place of love – from a desire to see our kids flourish. Overwhelmingly, when I ask the parents of the kids I work with as a child psychologist what they want for their kids, what the goal for therapy is, they say, "I want them to be happy."

So we find a way to fit in (and pay for) another class. Because if one Good Thing makes them happy and invests in their future, then surely five Good Things will make them five times as happy and future-proof.

But so often, what we end up with is overstretched, overstressed families. Overstressed, overstretched children. There's no time to for free play. No time to just be.

We only have so many hours in a week. This means that the more activities we enrol our children in, the less time there is for play. This is significant, because play is not just *important*, it is *essential* for optimal development. Through play, children develop their whole brain, especially the links between the lower brain functions (driven by needs and wants) and the higher brain functions (the more complex cognitive skills). Well-integrated, connected brains are better equipped to handle life with all its ups and downs and surprises. Unstructured free play, both alone and with siblings/friends,

develops emotional regulation skills, which enable kids to manage their big feelings, and fosters creativity and curiosity. And at the heart of things, it's creativity and curiosity that changes the world.

And research studies have found that free play reduces stress levels, improves language, and builds social and cognitive skills, particularly the executive functions. These are the mental skills that help us to Get Things Done – e.g. problem solving, planning, linking actions with consequences, short-term memory, attention and concentration, and knowing how to organise and start tasks. Useful skills for school and work, for completing assessments, papers, and projects.

Those benefits are very real.

But they are also hard to measure and quantify, slow to see changing. Extracurricular activities too have very real benefits, and they are much easier to point to – your kid can now count to ten in French/balance on the balance-beam/ play a recognisable song on the violin. In a busy, competitive world, those are the things that garner recognition and praise.

Play matters. But, as a play advocate, I sometimes have to pull back and remember that, as we've just noted, structured activities also have a lot of benefits. Depending on the activity, they too provide children with opportunities to practice emotional regulation and social skills, to be active, to develop their gifts and interests and build connections in the community. So the solution to our overscheduled lives can't be, "No activities." What we need is balance.

How do you find the right balance between *enough* and *too much*? Well, like many things parenting, there isn't one answer, because what works for one child and family won't work for another. Some families institute a "two activity maximum" rule per child, some have non-stop weekdays but keep weekends strictly for rest and family time. Some children need more stimulation, some children need less. As you think about what's going to be right for your family, some questions that might help are:

- What *does* our family schedule look like at the moment?
- Across the week, how much free time does my child have for free play, play dates, and to follow sparks of curiosity and creativity (e.g. arts & crafts, home science experiments, reading, etc.)?
- Do I find our schedule stressful/tiring?
- Do my kids find it stressful (do they seem frequently tired, grumpy, needing to be "hurried up", and/or anxious)?
- Are they getting enough sleep?
- What are my child's gifts/interests, and what do we value as a family? How do my child's activities fit in with this?

Another way of looking at the problem is through Dr Dan Siegel and David Rock's concept of the "Healthy Mind Platter". They identify seven essential mental activities that optimise brain development and health, and create balance and wellbeing in our lives. They are:

- **Focus time** (taking on challenges, working on goals)
- **Play time**
- **Connecting time** (with other people and the natural world)
- **Physical time**

- **Time-in** (noticing our thoughts, sensations, feelings, mental images)
- **Down time** (to relax and recharge)
- **Sleep time**

Each one builds and strengthens the brain's internal connections and our connections with the world around us. Exactly how much we need of each depends on the individual, and changes with the seasons of our lives. Think of a typical week in your family's life. Are you and your children getting those seven needs met? Is there an area that you/they need *more* or *less* of? If so, what can you do to bring it back into balance?

Extracurricular activities are important. But they are not **more** important than free play time. Both types of activities have very real, long term benefits, some of which are tangible, and some of which might take years to see. Ultimately, it comes down to finding the right balance of activity for your child and your family, which might involve the need to resist pressures to overcommit, and to embrace a definition of "happy" and "successful" that is far broader than the one society usually tries to present us with. Because ultimately, nobody knows your family like you do.

Good luck!

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