

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Are Today's Kids Suffering From "Activity Overload"?

from the American Counseling Association

Most of us remember our childhood days as happy, fun times. Sure, there was school work, but also lots of free time, friends to hang with, and none of the stress we adults face.

But is childhood today all that carefree? Examine your child's schedule and you may find it's much busier than you realized.... sports practice... soccer games... gymnastic classes... scout meetings... church groups and much more. Then there's school, homework, chores and just finding time to eat dinner.

Kids today lead busy lives, and sometimes those lives are just too busy.

Often, kids themselves drive the schedule, not wanting to feel left out or less involved than their friends. Teens may feel obligated to boost extracurricular activities in order to get into the "right" college. Peer pressure and adult expectations can make a child feel he or she has to stay super busy.

Sometimes it's parents doing the pushing, wanting their children to have a full range of opportunities, or worried that left to their own resources, kids will just get in trouble, play video games and eat junk food.

Try evaluating your child's schedule to see if it's negatively affecting your child's life or family relationships. Is there never time for a family meal or a game or movie night? Are your children frequently tired, anxious or depressed? Are they falling behind in school work and suffering lower grades? Are there stress-related health complaints, like frequent headaches and stomach aches?

When you see problems, it's time to limit activities. Start by filling in a calendar with all the current activities. You may be surprised just how busy your children are.

Accept that sometimes you just have to draw the line and say no. If an activity doesn't really match your child's interests, age, temperament and ability, why schedule it?

Discuss with your children not just what they want to do, but why they want to do it and how realistic it is. If doing an activity is just because friends are doing it, it might not be the right choice.

Discuss with an over-scheduled child what's happening and how it might be possible to cut back. Kids need free time away from organized activities just to be able to relax, to socialize with friends, to be part of the family, and to blow off steam. Give your kids the free time they need just to be kids.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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