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THE OVER-SCHEDULING DILEMMA | GREAT BROOKLYN BUILDINGS

Is Your Child Over-scheduled?

Figuring Out When Enough Is Enough

BY JEAN KUNHARDT AND LISA SPIEGEL

Who are the characters in literature we look to as role models of idyllic childhood? Consider Tom Sawyer and his long, mischief-filled days; or Alice, whose lazy, bored afternoons yielded a wonderland of magical adventures. Then there's Pippi Longstocking, fiercely independent, wild-spirited and committed to a life of no rules or schedules; and Christopher Robin, who roamed the meadows and woods with his menagerie of animal friends. Can we imagine any of these children in today's high pressure, over-scheduled world? It would be easier to imagine a story in which Christopher tells Pooh that he's too busy to look for honey with him because he has to go to art class.

As parent counselors who have worked extensively with NYC families for twenty years, we have witnessed a dramatic and, as we see it, a frightening escalation of the trend toward raising children with schedules as busy as any adult. Schools are contributing to it with an increase in homework and testing. Parents are compounding it with all of the attention they pay to extracurricular activities. But just as overeating at the feast table can leave one feeling stuffed, lethargic, and unhappy, so can too much scheduled activity have a contrary effect on the spirit of a child. A balanced diet—like a balanced childhood—is varied and filling, but also leaves time for digestion and rest and treats.

We are not against activities and we are not criticizing parents for their participation in this trend. If anything, we realize the satisfaction and fulfillment that well-run activities can bring to a child's life. We also empathize with the pressure some parents feel, as their kids get older, to help them produce, accomplish and succeed. What we want is to give parents the support they need to challenge the trend of too much too early.

One part of the problem is that early has become very early, especially for new parents who have been misled to believe that the sooner they start classes the more ahead of the game their child will be. Wanting to provide everything they can for their baby, new mothers often ask questions like "What does she need to hear, see and experience for optimum development?" But here's the thing: normal life itself provides plenty of stimulation for a baby. Watching you fold the laundry or empty the dishwasher, strolling down the aisle of the supermarket, watching a ceiling fan or the lights and shadows that come in the window—all of these are enough to stimulate the necessary brain development in a baby. Add to that a relationship with a less stressed parent and you have the ingredients of a healthy developing child.

Another way to help inspire parents to combat this pressure is to focus on what a child forfeits by being so scheduled. Unstructured time—particularly when children are not permitted access to TV, cell phones, computer games, and other electronic distractions—is a critically important element for healthy emotional and cognitive development. Children need down time



to discover their own internal motivation. This self-

awareness and self-motivation is often a more important ingredient for future success than talent or skill. Children who are always pushed or encouraged to join planned activities do not get the chance to figure out who they are, what they like, what they want. They do not get the opportunity to learn how to be alone and to enjoy their own company. Too much focus on expertise, competence and success detracts from the pleasures to be had in life, and produces children who are afraid to make mistakes and are so concerned about being perfect that they will not take risks in new arenas.

Another pitfall to be aware of is when a child is a little older and shows a flicker of interest in an activity. Parents often feel compelled to jump in and capitalize on this interest. A four-year-old starts experimenting with the piano and instantly he is signed up for lessons. A preschooler enjoys kicking her ball around the park and before she knows it she's joined a soccer team. Sports equipment and uniforms and musical instruments are bought and what started out as self-motivated interest now becomes filled with expectations and structured, required participation. And again, in doing this, we lose sight of the importance of letting the child's interest percolate and develop on its own.

In planning a menu of activities and classes for a child, there is no one right answer for all families. Children vary

widely in how much socialization and stimulation they want and need. Certain children who are more tentative and fearful may actually need

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your gentle encouragement to try new things. And many children will not complain about their packed schedules but rather plead to be able to continue it all.

Here are some of the questions parents should consider to make decisions that are finely tuned to their particular child and family:

- Does my child really yearn for more or am I reacting too quickly out of my own desire and enthusiasm or desire to keep up with other parents?
- Does my child seem to frequently ask to just stay home and do nothing even though once they are up and out they seem happy?
- Does my child have time in his schedule for unstructured free play?
- Is my child often overtired and irritable even if she is getting the right amount of sleep?
- Do I have to cajole and nag her to fulfill all of her obligations even if she is doing well in all of them?
- Does the rest of the family get the time and attention they need or is everyone catering to the busy schedule of the child?
- What is the effect of the child's schedule on the family as a whole? Are there opportunities for family time? Do siblings have time together?

As parents we need to cherish and safeguard the genuine carefree timelessness of childhood. Children's bodies and minds need relaxation time to process and integrate all that they are taking in. Childhood is not childhood if it becomes more like one big prep session for adulthood.

Jean Kanthart and Lisa Spiegel are the founders of Soho Parenting and the co-authors of "A Mother's Circle: An Intimate Dialogue on Becoming a Mother."