



The Myth of the Over-Scheduled Child

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“We know that teenagers do better when they are involved in organized activities outside of school, including athletics, drama, music, those kinds of things. They tend to do better academically; they tend to do better socially.”

– Carol Drummond, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

Headlines describe teens as busy, stressed out, and pushed into countless activities by their parents.

14-year-old Meredith rattles off a long list of activities. “I did ice skating, jazz, tap, ballet, tennis, swimming, softball,” she says.

“I play basketball, I do student council, I’m on the yearbook staff, I do the academic bowl team, I play the piano,” adds 14-year-old Rachel.

But according to research from the University of Maryland, a busy schedule is *not* linked to anxiety and depression.

In fact, it’s the kids who have one or two activities along with their school work who are the most well-balanced.

And it’s the kids who don’t have *any* activities who have lower self-esteem and make riskier decisions.

“They tend to be at higher risk for getting into trouble with drugs and alcohol,” says Dr. Drummond. “They don’t do as well academically.”

Dr. Drummond says it’s good for children to be engaged every week in something other than school, “From what the research shows - five or six hours a week, even up to ten hours a week, is really a good number of hours.”

And, experts say, one or two activities per week will still leave kids with plenty of time for homework and their friends.

“I think what we are striving for is balance,” says Dr. Drummond. “And the only way to determine that balance is to interact with your kids and observe their behavior - and making sure that they are enjoying the activities that they are participating in.”

Tips for Parents

Recent research confirms that involvement in extracurricular activities is more than just child’s play. School extracurricular activities and involvement in community clubs and organizations are important in fostering the strengths of youth; strengths that help young people steer away from undesirable behavior.

Such involvement in extracurricular activities helps young people discover and share talents, develop character and competence and often provide the added benefit of close relationships with caring, principled adults outside the home.

Creating balance between your child’s home life, social life and school life is important in the development of a happy and healthy child. Psychologist Carol Drummond has some suggestions:

- Allow your child to choose which activities to become involved with.
- Kids do better academically and socially if they are involved with a few activities, instead of specializing in one.
- While it is important for children to be involved with at least one activity, allow your child to choose how busy he or she wants to be. Research shows five to ten hours per week is an ideal number. However, children should be involved in activities for intrinsic reasons - not because parents or teachers are forcing them.

- Studies indicate that “over-scheduled” children are involved in 20 or more hours of activities per week. However, each child will be different. If your child starts resisting activities, or if he or she is having problems sleeping or eating, parents should consider whether the child is over-scheduled.

References

- *Parental Pressure on Students*, Pew Research Center
- *Organized Activity Participation, Positive Youth Development and the Over-Scheduling Hypothesis*, Society of Research in Child Development
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