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## After School Activities: How Busy Should Your Child Be?

by Ann E. LaForge

Last spring, Paul Conlin, 11, of Fairfield, Connecticut, was a busy boy. Between school, homework, a paper route, basketball practice, Nintendo games, and extra evenings of altar-boy service because of Lent, he was putting in 13 hour days and it was beginning to show. "By bedtime he was so wired he couldn't get to sleep, and he was becoming irritable," his father, Joe, recalls. "His tight schedule was creating anxiety for the whole family—someone was always dropping something to drive him somewhere—and I was afraid it would affect his school work."

To make sure Paul had time to relax, and to prevent him from disrupting the routine of the rest of the family, Conlin put a stop to the fever-pitched Nintendo playing and asked his son to work out a less demanding altar-boy schedule. Though reluctant to cut back on any of his activities, Paul complied; his behavior and mood improved, and soon everyone in the Conlin house was breathing more easily. After Lent, when Paul's extracurricular demands eased up, his father loosened the reins.

Though Paul's case of activity overload was temporary, it illustrates the importance of balancing a child's out-of-school hours with both structured programs and unstructured play or relaxation time. "Extracurricular involvement is very important in childhood," says Barbara Wilier, Ph.D., public affairs director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Washington, D.C. "It can help a kid become well-rounded, establish friendships, gain exposure to new things, and build self-esteem. Unfortunately, people think that if a little is good, more is better, so they push their kids to do too much. I've seen children running the same kind of rat-race schedules their parents do. Kids burn out under that kind of pressure."

**Underbooking** a child's time also has negative results, says Joan Bergstrom, Ed.D., chairwoman of the Department of Professional Studies in Early Childhood at Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts, and author of the book *School's Out - Now What?* According to Dr. Bergstrom, children spend 80 percent of their waking hours outside the classroom. "Those hours have a powerful influence on their present and future lives. If a child's out-of-school time is unstructured and unproductive," she explains, "he can get caught up in overexposure to television, overeating, fighting with siblings, fear, loneliness, and withdrawal."

Even if your child is not a star student, she should enroll in at least one activity. "When parents tell me their children are struggling in school or have low self-esteem, I advise them to sign up the kids for after-school activities," says Nancy Berla, operator of a national parents' help line (800 NETWORK) for the National Committee for Citizens in Education, in Columbia, Maryland. "And I warn parents not to prohibit extracurricular participation as a punishment. It can improve children's confidence levels and help them cope with the stress of school."

Thus, the question isn't whether children should participate in extracurricular activities, but when and how, notes Dr. Bergstrom. These guidelines will help parents strike that delicate balance between too much and too little.

## Growing Interests

One of the first questions parents ask in regard to extracurricular involvement is, "What's appropriate for my child at various ages?" Unfortunately, experts are often reluctant to offer specific guidelines on age-appropriate activities because of developmental differences.

For a kindergartener, experts such as Peg Dawson, Ed.D., a school psychologist in Exeter, New Hampshire, and president-elect of the National Association of School Psychologists in Washington, D.C., simply advise that a couple of programs that stress fun and play over organized learning is enough. "Pushing a child beyond his or her physical or emotional development, or narrowing the child's focus to one activity at such a young age, is likely to lead to nothing but burnout, and it may cause injury," Dr. Dawson explains.

Structured activities that emphasize group interaction, such as in the Brownies or Cub Scouts, should be introduced around first grade, according to Dr. Wilier. "At this age, children become sensitive to comparing themselves with others, however, so it's important that the activities stress cooperation, not competition." As for the type of activities to choose, Dr. Bergstrom suggests you hone in on your child's interests, then steer him toward related activities. To get started, she recommends asking the following questions:

1. What activity would you most like?
2. What is your favorite thing to do when you're not in school?
3. What do you least like to do when you're not in school?
4. What would you like to change about what you now do while out of school?
5. What do you want to be better at?
6. What do you wish you could do that you don't know how to do?
7. What places near where we live would you like to visit more often?
8. What is your favorite time of day?
9. What time of day do you like least?

In some instances, you may have a clearer sense of what your child wants than he does. When Geoffrey Mitchell of Charlotte, North Carolina, was in first grade, his teacher told his mother, Mary, that he was disrupting the class to gain attention from the other students. When the teacher learned that Geoffrey had no boys his own age to play with in his neighborhood, she advised his mother to get him involved in an extracurricular activity. Since Geoffrey had always enjoyed running and

kicking balls, Mitchell suggested soccer. "No way," Geoffrey said.

"I asked him why he didn't want to sign up," his mother explains, "and he responded with questions like: 'What if I lose? What if the big kids hurt me?'" His mother assured him that all the children would be his age, and that enjoying the game was more important than winning. She also warned the coach that Geoffrey was nervous. Her son is now one of the best players-and he's doing better in school.

"Understanding your child's temperament as well as his skills is very important," says Dr. Dawson. "Some kids are outgoing and find it easy to mix in with new groups; others are withdrawn and need a lot of time to warm up. Sometimes you need to start slowly: let the kid observe a few classes or practices, and talk to the leader to make sure the personality fit is right."

## **What Your Child Really Wants**

Many parents simply steer their children into activities they enjoyed-or were forced into as kids. "Parents have to be clear about the differences between what their kid wants and what they want," says Dr. Bergstrom. "Don't let yourself get carried away with certain ideas of what's right for the child. Ask yourself: who really wants to be involved in this, my child or myself? What do I hope will come out of the experience for each of us?"

Another tactic parents often take is signing up their kids for whatever the rest of the neighborhood is into, says Dr. Bergstrom. But this can be risky. "Some parents are afraid their kids will miss out if they don't get involved in everything," she explains. "This leads to overbooking and burnout. Kids need time for unstructured play."

Jumping on the bandwagon can also land a child in a situation he or she isn't ready to handle physically, mentally, or emotionally. "Look carefully at your child's skills," adds Berla. "If the fit is wrong, don't sign up."

And don't get caught in the trap of thinking of structured activities as replacements for babysitters. "It's easy to convince yourself that clubs and lessons are better for a child than being home with a babysitter, but an over-full schedule is never good," says Dr. Dawson. "The more different environments a child has to adjust to in a day, the higher her stress level rises. Kids need time to unwind, just as adults do."

## **Coping With A Quitter**

For many kids, interest in a particular activity can begin to wane after a while. How can a parent judge whether the activity isn't strong or fun enough to hold the child's interest-or whether he wants out because he's feeling lazy?

"If a kid says, 'Not again!' or 'Do I really have to go?' find out why," says Dr. Willer. Sometimes children reach a plateau in skill levels and need extra encouragement or discipline to move ahead, she adds. Other times they simply get sluggish, feel shy, or lack confidence, and a subtle push will help. If possible, lay down ground rules before an activity begins. When Paul Conlin announced he wanted a paper route, his father told him he had to walk the entire route every day for two weeks

before accepting the job. Paul agreed, stuck to his commitment, and has been a successful paperboy for two years. This year he wants to take piano lessons, but his father has told him he will have to make a six month commitment.

If a child sticks with an activity but complaints persist, look for nonverbal clues. "I know a girl who whines every time her mother takes her to gymnastics," says Dr. Bergstrom. "But during the class she's involved and looks like she's having fun. In contrast, I know a boy who took up ice hockey and disliked it so much he threw up before games."

When Paul Hetkirk of Richmond, Virginia, was 6, he begged his parents to send him to day camp. Though it was costly, his parents agreed. But after only three days, he wanted out. "He said there were too many kids and they acted too wild," recalls his mother, Beth. "I could see it was causing him a lot of stress, so I pulled him out, even though that meant losing some money."

Flexibility is important. If an activity is causing an undue amount of stress in the child, or creating conflict between the child and the parents, it's time for the parents to re examine the situation. "Extracurricular activities should help a child become well rounded," sums up Dr. Dawson. "They shouldn't place pressure on him to perform."

### **How To Tell When Your Child Is Overbooked**

It isn't always easy to tell if your child's day is too structured with extracurricular activities. Some kids don't know how, won't, or are afraid to tell their parents when they've had enough. Here are some common warning signals:

1. unusual irritability or high levels of crankiness
2. temper tantrums
3. exhaustion
4. inability or unwillingness to sleep at night
5. excessive crying on the days activities are scheduled
6. a pervasive shift in mood when activities are scheduled
7. headaches
8. vomiting on the day of the activity
9. regressive behavior, such as thumb-sucking, baby talk, or bed-wetting
10. stories from your child about bad or scary things that happened to other children during the activity
11. hyperactivity at the end of the day
12. negative feedback from instructors or coaches
13. a sudden drop in grades or changes in school behavior

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