

Ask A School Psychologist: After-School Activities Q&A

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych

Q; I am wondering about after-school activities, how busy should my child/youth be?

A: Striking a balance between overscheduling kids and kids who have too much free time is bewildering for most parents these days. A parent's ultimate goal is to raise a child who is well-rounded - a child who is both physically and mentally healthy. A parent's endeavour should be to provide their children with after-school activities that are physically engaging (dance, hockey, for example) and intellectually interesting (piano, Air Cadets, for example) all the while preserving ample time for family, friends, unstructured play... and homework.

What to know

Research has established that teens who participate in after-school organized sports are healthier and happier than their peers. In fact, there is consensus that youth who participate in any type of structured extracurricular activity maintain higher school attendance, perform better in school and have a more positive self-concept than their classmates. On the other hand, research has documented that by age 13, 3 of every 4 kids who participated in years of organized activities have permanently quit all extracurricular commitments - they are burnt out. Experts have also raised concerns that children who have not engaged in unstructured play can become teens who are easily bored and do not know how to occupy themselves when they have free time. Parenting in the 21st century is challenging, and parents need to determine what the best fit is for their children and ultimately, their family.

What to ask

Does your child complain or comment that they would just like to stay home and play? Children say the darndest things... kids will express their feelings even when they really enjoy all their activities. Listen to them. Being on the go all the time is stressful and can become overwhelming. Kids and adults need downtime. A good rule of thumb is everyone should have nights off. For kids, I recommend three or four nights a week. A night off is not watching your brother's hockey practice; it is being at home and having free time. Please consider that a family needs time to bond around a dinner table more often than on Deerfoot Trail.

Does your child maintain a regular, age-appropriate bedtime? Awake time? Hours of sleep? In Canada, we are experiencing a sleep deprivation epidemic. When kids and adults try to fit too many commitments into a day, it is generally their hours of sleep that are curtailed. Recent studies indicate that over-stimulated, over-scheduled children/youth are getting at least one hour less sleep a night than minimum recommendations. Children and youth who are not getting the appropriate amount of sleep are more irritable, cognitively lethargic and less able to concentrate in school than their peers. Irregular bedtimes and getting up early for a practice or to complete homework has a negative impact on children's physical and mental health. If hockey practice is at 7am weekly, then the night before must be adjusted for sleep needs and homework responsibilities.

How many activities is my child participating in? Is this number reasonable? Parents have the responsibility to set boundaries and determine what is best for their children and their family. Spouses should take the time to discuss the number and type of activities that are desired, reflect on what is reasonable and consider the time commitments that these activities will entail for the entire family. Then as a parenting team, determine what is workable for the family and what choices their children have. It is not unreasonable to say, "Yes, you can be in dance this year. You have a choice between ballet or Highland." Explain that ballet lessons are these nights and include two recitals; comparatively, highland involves these commitments. Discuss with children their options and clearly explain expectations (committed nights a week, bedtimes, homework routines) and then help them work through their tough choices.

What to consider

As parents, look at the long-term goal; you want your child to be healthy and happy - a well-balanced child. I believe that it is wiser to facilitate your child's participation in one or two activities at a time that can be maintained into their teen years - possibly into adulthood - rather than over-committing your child's and family's time resulting in over-scheduled children (four to 12 years old) who become bored teens that typically disengage from all extracurricular activities.

Dr. R. Coranne Johnson, R. Psych., has been working in the education field for over 25 years as a teacher, administrator and school psychologist. She has also taught university courses in the areas of special education, psychology and program effectiveness. Through Dr. Johnson's work in schools, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about learning, literacy and special education. Dr. Johnson can be contacted through her website, helpingchildren.ca.