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WORK & FAMILY
 By SUE SHELLENBARGER



Helping Overbooked Kids Cut Back

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When Debra Cooper's 6-year-old daughter Taylor resisted taking a family vacation day because she was anxious about missing extracurricular activities, Ms. Cooper decided she was overscheduled and started cutting back.

But stepping off the treadmill wasn't easy, Ms. Cooper says. When Taylor started coming home after school, there was no one in the neighborhood to play with; other kids were at practices or lessons. Other parents were skeptical, hinting Ms. Cooper was short-changing her daughter. And Taylor herself soon asked to resume some activities. Frustrated, Ms. Cooper wondered, "How do we stop and get off this mommy marathon?"

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1 • [Work & Family Mailbox](#):² Sue Shellenbarger answers readers' questions.

• [The Juggle](#):³ Join a [discussion](#)⁴ about the pros and cons of overscheduling kids at [The Juggle](#)⁵, the Journal's work and family blog.



Written about and discussed for decades, the problem of overscheduled children still looms large. Many parents keep children busy believing that stimulating activities will aid their development; the pattern is most marked among 9- to 12-year-olds. But the trend has gone too far, the American Academy of Pediatrics said in January in the journal "Pediatrics"; kids need more time for free play and family togetherness. Resolving the issue can require some artful life-balancing skills.

Not all researchers see overbooking as a widespread problem. Sandra Hofferth, a professor of family studies at the University of Maryland, found an increase since 1981 in the time kids spend in structured activities, based on a detailed study of 331 children ages 9 to 12. But only one-fourth were what she calls "hurried children," engaged in three or more activities, or four or more hours of activities a week. Among them, she found no evidence of elevated behavior problems, such as being withdrawn or having poor self-esteem or trouble getting along with other children.

The signs of overload are often more subtle: overtiredness, irritability, falling grades, anxiety or obstinacy. As a recovered overbooker myself, I can attest that it can cause anxiety. My kids, now 16 and 19, say they've forgiven me for signing them up for too much stuff in elementary school. But I now know that it sometimes stressed them out.

KEEPING AN EYE OUT

Signs a child may need a break

- More than two extra-curricular activities at once
- A drop in school grades
- Anxiety, overtiredness, obstinacy or irritability
- Inability to entertain him or herself
- A lack of relaxed parent-child time

To help Taylor relax, Ms. Cooper, Aventura, Fla., dropped swimming and tennis last fall. But she has since resumed tennis and added karate at the request of Taylor, who has been "conditioned" to being busy, Ms. Cooper says. "Now I'm trying to un-condition her, letting her know it's OK not to be moving at 100 miles an hour every day." She's also watching her closely for signs of renewed stress.

Some parents fear they'll inadvertently stunt their child's potential.

Jane Istvan had her son Sam, 8, drop year-round soccer and just do baseball this spring, to preserve two hours a day for family time. But she worries: "What if Sam could have been a fantastic soccer player," and by curbing his activities, "I'm screwing him up?"

Others fear their kids will be ostracized. At the school Beth Blecherman's 8-year-old son attends, kids who don't play organized sports are sometimes excluded from playground games. But after noticing that large-group activities made her son anxious, Ms. Blecherman, Palo Alto, Calif., is cutting out team sports anyway, and he's happier for it, she says.

How do you decide what activities to keep and which ones to cut? It's wise to take a measured approach; Ms. Cooper had Taylor complete her dance season and recital this spring, to teach her to finish what she starts. Beyond that, Alvin Rosenfeld, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and author of "The Overscheduled Child," recommends dividing activities into two groups -- those you regard as essential, such as religious school, and those seen as optional. Schedule the first group, and allow the child to select from the rest, he advises.

Ask yourself, "What activities make my child glow?" says Kenneth Ginsburg, author of the American Academy of Pediatrics article. "What does she get excited about?" I found keeping kids in activities they don't enjoy won't lead them to continue that pursuit -- no matter how much you hope they will. Instead, heed your child's inner motivations. Ideally, says Dr. Ginsburg, a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, they'll seek becoming "a richer, more balanced person" over resume-building or fueling parental pride.

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