

Experts: Despite their energy, kids still at risk of burnout

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By Lisa Porterfield-CNN

(CNN) -- It's graduation day at VT's American Freestyle Karate school in Marietta, Georgia, and the studio's junior instructor, Austin Leake, impresses students and parents with a perfectly executed flying sidekick.

Austin, who is working toward his second-degree black belt, balances training with hours of gymnastics and other activities that would exhaust many adults. But Austin is only 12.

Like many kids around the country, Austin is back in school now, juggling homework and extracurricular activities. In addition, Austin's grandfather Jack Leake picks him up from school four afternoons a week and drives him across town for practice.

How does Austin find time to get straight A's?

"I do most of my homework in the car when we're driving to practice. And whatever I have left, I do when I get home," he said.

Austin has tremendous energy and can manage many activities and do them well. But not all children are like this.

"There are some kids who become stressed when they expect themselves to perform at that level," said Dr. David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University and author of the book "The Hurried Child."

Chronic stress can have severe consequences for children and adults, according to Dr. Kate Cronan, medical editor for KidsHealth.org. It can cause people to lose sleep, eat poorly, become irritable and fall behind at school or work.

How big a problem is it?

Forty-one percent of 882 children ages 9-13 surveyed in a recent KidsHealth poll said they feel stressed either most of the time or always because they have too much to do. And more than three-quarters of those surveyed said that they wished they had more free time.

Even Austin, who is comfortable with his packed schedule, said he wishes he had more time to "just hang out and play video games or read."

Overscheduling is a growing problem for American families, according to Dr. Alvin Rosenfeld, author of "The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap."

"A cultural phenomenon is taking place where parents are being told that the right way to raise their kids is to involve them in every enrichment opportunity possible, even if it means leaving the entire family feeling anxious and stressed," he said.

"The notion that education is a race has become quite prevalent and part of the conventional wisdom," said Elkind of Tufts University. And this race begins at infancy. Videos and software designed to give kids as young as six-months-old a leg up on the competition are being sold at toy stores around the country.

Experts suggest considering the motivations behind scheduling multiple enrichment opportunities for kids. Is it because the activities are enjoyable or is the sole purpose to give kids a competitive edge? Rosenfeld advises parents to "weigh the benefits of participation against the cost -- time, energy, logistical effort, stress and expense -- to you, your child and the rest of your family."

The trade-offs

One of the consequences of overscheduling is that kids and parents have less free time, and as a society we may be paying a price.

More families are eating dinner on the fly, often grabbing fast food on their way to soccer practice or music lessons.

"The dinner time is an important time for family members to relax and catch up with each other," Cronan of KidsHealth said. She recommends that parents try to carve out at least a couple of nights a week for family meals.

"It's an important time for kids to learn how to unwind and relax," she said. "... If they don't learn this skill now, it will [be] more difficult to learn as they get older."

Less free time equals less play time, and "kids need time to play," Elkind said. "It's in their free time that children are able to initiate their own activities and nourish their creative and imaginative abilities."

And to compete in the 21st century global economy we need to have innovative thinkers in the fields of science and engineering, "fields that require the kind of thinking that comes from play," Elkind said.

Achieving balance

"If you suspect your kids are too busy, just come out and ask: Do you feel like you're doing too many things?" Cronan advised.

Austin sometimes asks for a day off, "which we let him take," Jack said. "We don't want him burning out; and since Austin is so responsible, it's really not an issue."

Cronan also recommends that parents set aside downtime for kids and give them options for constructive, self-directed activities, such as browsing a library or taking a walk in a park.

It's important to remember that children aren't the only ones affected by overscheduling. When family schedules are too busy, it can be difficult for parents to make time for themselves and each other.

"Children who do best in life have parents who are relatively satisfied with their own lives," Rosenfeld said. "Parents need to pay attention to their marriage or relationship and have fun with each other. Nothing can help your kids more, because if you're feeling satisfied with your life, your kids will feel a deep, inner security and a lack of deep anxiety."

There is no right way to parent. Adults can solicit guidance, but in the end, parents know their kids the best, Rosenfeld said.

"You need to figure out what's good for you and your family, and what in your heart is right for your child," he said.