

Over Scheduled Kids

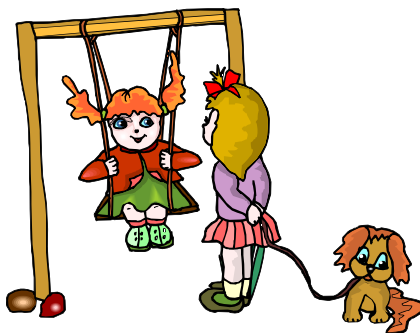
Adapted from work by William J. Doherty, University of Minnesota

A new phenomenon—over scheduled kids—has come upon us in the last two decades. The picture of a carefree childhood with time for play and day dreaming is no longer the reality for many children. For some, childhood has become a rat race of hyper-scheduling, over-busyness, and loss of family time.

Children Experience Major Decline in Free Time

A national time diary survey by the University of Michigan has documented these changes over the years from 1981 to 1997. During this time, children ages 3 – 12 saw a major decline in free time. Changes include:

- Losing 12 hours per week in free time
- Dropping 25% in play activities
- Decreasing 50% in unstructured outdoor activities (walking, hiking, camping)
- Doubling their time in structured sports
- Having a five-fold increase in time spent in spectator sports
- Experiencing a 50% increase in homework time.



As a parent of a preschooler, you may have noticed that there are many opportunities for structured activities including sports, play groups, library storybook time, dance, gymnastics, music lessons, etc. You may have considered enrolling your child in some of these activities. Now is a good time for you and your family to consider what and how many structured activities you want for your child.

Changes in Families' Time Use

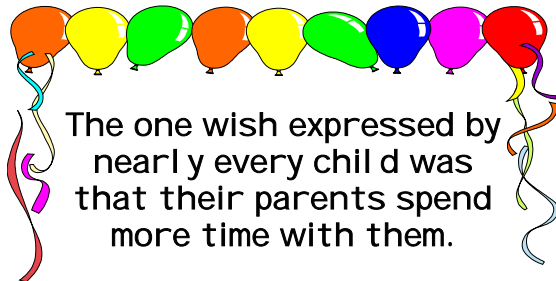
Research is showing significant changes in children and families' time. Partly as a consequence of children's new schedules, families spend less time interacting. Household conversations between parent and child—time for just talking and not doing anything else—nearly dropped off the radar screen. For the first time, family life revolves around children's optional activities rather than these activities revolving around the family.

The adult world of hyper-competition has invaded the family. But, is a good parent the one who is an opportunity provider in a competitive world? If so, parents may never know if they have done enough. Parenting has become a competitive sport, with trophies going to the busiest.

The reasons for this increase in structured time for children are many such as:

- There are more opportunities for children, especially girls.
- The activities, particularly sports, are far more intense.
- Working parents need to fill a child's time after school with structured activities.
- Concern that a child will miss out on opportunities or fall behind their peers.

Therapist Ron Taffel, one of our best observers of youth culture, interviewed preschoolers through 6th grade children. The one wish expressed by nearly every child was that their parents spend more time with them. Some of this lack of time comes from parents having to work more hours and more jobs. But another factor is the over scheduling of children.



Parents today are often recreation directors on the family cruise ship. Social pressure results in sacrifices of time from the parent-to-parent relationship, extended family get-togethers, family meal time, religious activities, bedtime talks, holiday celebrations and family vacations.

In the 2002 national YMCA/Search Institute poll, 41% of parents reported their children's overscheduling with activities and homework was something that made their job as a parent harder. Parents say they hate these schedules, but don't know how to cut back without depriving their children of opportunities.

The University of Michigan study of children's time found that more meal time at home was the strongest predictor of better achievement scores and fewer behavioral problems. Mealtimes were far more powerful than time spent in school, studying, church, playing sports, or art activities.

We are facing a new threat to childhood and family life, one disguised in the costumes of fun, achievement, healthy competition, and keeping busy. Fallout from over scheduled kids include sports injuries never before seen in young children; over-stressed children who lack interpersonal skills and do not have skills to schedule themselves; "out-sourcing of parenting" to structured activities; and parental peer pressure.

Putting Family First (www.puttingfamilyfirst.info) has research information, tips for enriching your family life, and other ideas for "taking back your family time."

Yet, with all that is said about over scheduled children, an important point is that the notion of over-scheduled kids is not universal. Some children aren't doing enough.

As a parent of a young child, one of your roles as a parent will be to decide how much to commit to structured activities versus family time. The challenge will be to find a balance based on your individual family values. Decide what is most important to you—and stick to it.

Sources:

William J. Doherty, Over scheduled kids, underconnected families: the research evidence. Family Social Science Department, University of Minnesota. December 2004.

William J. Doherty, See how they run: when did childhood turn into a rat race? [Psychotherapy networker](#). September-October, 2003.

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