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FAMILY & EDUCATION



Overbooking a kid's schedule can backfire on a family. (Getty Images)

THE JUGGLING ACT

HOW TO FIND BALANCE IN BUSY KIDS' SCHEDULES

BY SHERYL NANCE-NASH

Olivia Howell has two sons, Weston 6, and Wyatt, 3. Weston participates in theater via the booster club at school. That's enough for him and her.

"I'm a big fan of letting the kids have downtime to think and play," says the Northport mom. "We're not really a huge sports family, but I do anticipate them wanting to try martial arts or theater activities. However, I'm a proponent of taking it slow and not rushing around if we can, so I tend to underschedule rather than overschedule."

She has friends who do things differently.

"I have seen many parents exhausted from driving around nonstop, all day," she says. "It's important to have balance. Do activities, but also remember how important it is to spend time together as a family."

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BALANCING BUSY KIDS' SCHEDULES

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Finding the right mix of school, extracurricular activities, and free time is a challenge for many families. The book *Seraphina Does EVERYTHING!* by Melissa Gratias tells the story of today's families through Seraphina, who with her various hobbies, clubs, and sports winds up overwhelmed and underprepared to succeed in her jam-packed schedule of activities.

Children's schedules can get out of control from them taking on too much as they explore their often-changing interests, but also from parents who are pushing to prepare them to be ideal students for college, with a bio packed with activities designed to impress.

"There has to be balance: You don't want to become victims of the schedule," says Howell.

Here's how to juggle without dropping the ball.

PRIORITIZE

"I recommend students find out what they're passionate about and pursue that wholeheartedly," says Christopher Rim, CEO of Command Education, a New York City company that offers student mentoring, tutoring and other services.

"They should tier their activities from tasks they feel most strongly about and to those that are more cursory extracurriculars," he says. "That



Kids need downtime in addition to their extracurricular activities. (Getty Images)

rehearsals, practices, and tutoring sessions back to back seven days a week."

"You don't want to become victims of the schedule," says Olivia Howell.

way, when push comes to shove, a student knows where their priorities lie and can choose one commitment over another instead of spreading themselves too thin."

KEEP PERSPECTIVE

Parents naturally want to do their part to help their kids get into college, but it can have the reverse effect.

"Don't focus on making your child seem well rounded," warns Rim. "That's how kids end up with

If you want to tweak their schedule, add things that relieve stress.

"Give them a journal to process their thoughts, plan weekly family game nights — not every minute of their day has to be spent résumé building" says Rim. "As much as your child is preparing to become a college student, they're preparing to be a person in the world. They should learn strategies to manage stress and how to have fun."

GIVE TIME FOR TRIALS

It's hard to know how a new activity will change things. Allowing a trial period for ongoing evaluation is helpful. Set a time period, say six weeks, to evaluate and discuss how your child is feeling.

"Stay flexible, nothing is written in stone," says Dana Dorfman, a psychotherapist in New York City.

Children exhibit overload in various ways, depending upon their developmental stage and personalities, says Dorfman.

"Some children can express their feelings," she says. "Others experience physical complaints such as stomachaches and headaches, or resist the activity entirely."

Take note if your child has significant changes in eating or sleeping, or difficulty concentrating.

Says Dorfman, "They may be overwhelmed, particularly if these things persist for two weeks or more."

SET THE PACE

Don't live an overbooked life yourself. The kids are watching.

"Show kids through your actions that life balance is important," says Gratias. "Our children look to us for guidance. Teach them to say no to opportunities and activities that could lead to an unbalanced life. View each change in season as an opportunity to re-evaluate family commitments."