

Balancing Extra-Curricular Activities with Family Life

Hello and welcome back to our third installment of our parenting tips section! Last time, we looked at the importance of the family meal. This is not as easy as it used to be. Many children are involved in a variety of after-school activities that cut right into this time. If you have two or three children, it's very possible to be on the go every night. Parents are bombarded with all of the many wonderful activities offered to children starting at a young age (Baby Yoga and Baby Salsa Dancing are actual activities that new parents are encouraged to take part in!).

Often, parents feel the pressure to put their children into many activities, hearing phrases like, "they're going to need an edge in this world". It's hard to know how much to do. According to Dr. Gordon Neufeld, there is no real research that demonstrates that extra-curricular activities lead to success later in life. Dr. Neufeld points out that the brain needs time to de-compress in order to "flourish" as he calls it, especially after a day at school. The key ingredients here include time for children to use their imagination in an unstructured way (that is, free play) and proper rest. Neufeld is concerned that activities separate children from their families, which can lead to attachment issues (more on this topic in the future). Dr. Leonard Sax seems to agree with Neufeld by saying there is a danger in over-scheduling children to the point of burnout and giving the unintended message that "what you do is more important than who you are". Dr. Sax notes in his book that in Europe, it's unusual to find parents shuttling their children between constant activities. It may seem counter-intuitive but learning and doing more and more is not actually better.

This does not mean, however, that children shouldn't take part in extra-curricular activities, especially if they enjoy something. Children can master valuable skills (such as learning how to swim) and can feel a sense of accomplishment (such as learning a difficult song on the violin). The healthier approach would be to limit activities to one or two per week and preferably at times that don't interrupt meal time or family time. Allow children to take part in activities that they truly enjoy in order to pursue their passions. Also, be wary of activities that require huge time or financial commitments. Ask yourself, "What is the benefit here to my family?" and ask yourself if your family schedule feels balanced or stressed. Look at what your older children may be getting at school already. For example, if they are on the volleyball and basketball team, it's okay to say 'no' to hockey.

Next time we will look at proper sleep and why it's important.