

Free Time **Rx** for Kids

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PHOTO BY JEFF SILKER

How was your summer? Did you fill up each day for your children, believing that all the extras you could fit in would be beneficial to them? Over-scheduled, frantic days tend to be quite typical. I don't know about you, but my summer as a boy did not include days with filled up agendas. Rather, they were lazy days of summer, playing with siblings, neighbors, and yes, even Mom and Dad. Our sports were neighborhood games of football or playing "kick-the-can" and "annie-annie-over" the garage. We lay out under the stars and dreamed about what it would be like to walk on the moon. We had contests to see who could find the best characters in the clouds. We hiked and fished, biked and swam. No extra lessons, no travel teams for sports – we had the summer off. And yes, summers off still included making our beds, cleaning our room, doing dishes, and taking out the garbage. These were our responsibilities, but when we were done, we had free time – time to read, to invent, to plan, to build, to dream, and to simply be a kid. They were unscheduled days that left us free to enjoy the simple pleasures of childhood.

You may be wondering where my nostalgic mood is coming from and where it may take us. For the past year I worked as a "Rent-a-Doc." I traveled to work in clinics and emergency rooms in many parts of the state. If I was to tell you one thing that really surprised and dismayed me, it would be the number of children and teens I saw who were on antidepressants. I had to wonder what has changed in the lives of our kids to bring on this change. Much has changed in society during the past forty years. The "Leave it to Beaver" years are not likely to return anytime soon. Families face many challenges that bring stress to the home, but some of the stress kids face is generated by our attempts to be the best parents we can and to make too many opportunities available to our kids. Sometimes our kids are being pressured to succeed; they get stress from being hurried to learn more, faster and faster, to be the best, to do it all, to be first.

Parenting is a tough job. The love and concern we have for our kids can lead us to want to give them every opportunity and participate in everything. But this very drive in parents puts

pressures on our kids: pressure to achieve, to compete. Many children will have problems dealing with the increasing responsibilities and this may lead to stress disorders. It is interesting to note that a child will not remember a packed schedule, filled with fun activities when they are older. Rather, they will remember the anxiety and pressure that they felt about being on time for each new event.

A dear teacher reminded my wife and I that there was no need to push children too hard. She spoke of medical things like the myelinization of the nerves that doesn't occur until kids are older. She said, "Be patient. When it (the myelinization) occurs, learning comes naturally." David Elkind speaks of this in his book, *The Hurried Child*. Boys are slower at grasping certain skills than girls at young ages, but this evens out as the myelinization process occurs. Mr. Elkind gave a wake up call to parents fifteen years ago warning of the dangers of speeding up childhood to adulthood. What he found troublesome then is even more troublesome today. Murders by teens and teen suicide have increased at a rate triple of what it was twenty years ago.

The pressure is on parents today – pressure from colleges who want to see that the student was involved and over-involved in many areas. The pressure is on parents and students to sign up for all the extra leagues and teams and clinics, because only those who do will advance in their sport. The pressure is on to allow these activities to take up family time. The pressure and stressful life of the parents turns into a stressful life for the children.

What do I hear the children say? They are afraid to tell their moms and dads that they want to just stay home. They don't want to disappoint Mom and Dad. Physically, they are presenting with stomachaches, headaches, insomnia, and anxiety attacks; they look like miniature adults with stress burnout.

Children and teens need down time. Time to cuddle up with Mom and Dad or a good book, time to play games – time to get messy playing with their homemade goop! Kids also need time where they can hang out with extended family, time to ask questions about their heritage, time to dream and share their dreams and ask about yours. Children need unscheduled time so they can be creative whether it is by painting or coloring, building or designing, doing a home science experiment, or taking apart a toy and putting it together again. When all their time has been scheduled, they miss out on these things.

None of us are perfect parents and our kids are the first to point it out. One of our older daughters reminded us that we never let her sign up for all the extra sports events in the summer and she couldn't see how we could allow the "little girls" to be involved in so much. "Can't you see what it does?" she asked. "They have no time left. They have no time to visit me, no time to dream, no time to be kids." Wow! Talk about hitting us between the eyes; but she is correct. It is easy to get the kids over involved, for all the right reasons, because that is what everyone is doing.

So, if this is a problem, what do we do? First, we need to remember that as our children age, the extra-curricular activities are very important. You can find wonderful extra-curricular activities through your child's school and in your community. Check them ▶

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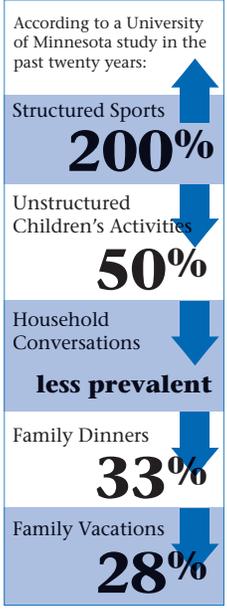
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out. Many positives come from an environment that is stress-free and also includes the chance to learn and make new friends. After you have checked out all the possibilities, sit down with your child and let him/her choose their favorite activity from your list. Determine before the “meeting” just how many activities they can choose. Try to help them think through the commitment and decide if it would adversely affect your family time.

Many experts in child development believe that one sport per school year is sufficient. Only you can make that decision, just be brave enough to follow through and not fall prey to the many activities that will come across your path. Remember that there is scientific research that says that the most important activity for young children is self-initiated, unstructured play. The University of Minnesota did a study showing that in the past twenty years structured sports have doubled, unstructured children’s activities have declined 50 percent, household conversations are far less prevalent, family dinners have declined 33 percent, and family vacations have decreased 28 percent.

It’s time we start the trend instead of doing the following. Meet with others who are concerned for their children. Stick together in your decision. Overburdened children, even though the activities in themselves are not bad, lead to over stressed children. Stressed out children may become rebellious and depressed. Work for balance in your children’s and your own life. *w*



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