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Extracurricular Activities

Kids these days are busy with more hobbies, sports, and extracurricular activities than ever before. At the same time, parents in the United States are for the first time in modern history working more hours than any other culture in the world. Balancing the needs of your child to have a well rounded experience growing up with your obligations at work is an increasing source of anxiety and stress for both parents and kids.

The importance of after school activities

Parents should emphasize schoolwork and homework as top priorities in their children's lives. But school can't have to be your child's only avenue for learning, expression, and growth. Kids should also be encouraged to explore their talents, pursue fun hobbies or sports, and participate in enjoyable activities outside of school.

Extracurricular activities help exercise your child's mind and body. They introduce your child to healthy social settings and present opportunities to make new friends. Perhaps most importantly, getting your child involved in an after school activity can help your child discover hidden talents, push boundaries, work on areas that need improvement, and perfect skills through practice and involvement.

It can also help nurture his or her personality. According to a study by the U.S. Department of Education, a child's involvement in after school activities increases his or her quality of life. Whether it's an oil painting class, an intramural basketball team, saxophone lessons or the school chess club, there are plenty of opportunities for your child to both discover new interests and pursue favorite passions.

How much is too much?

A recent study by the International Labor Organization showed that fathers are now working an average of 50.9 hours a week and mothers are averaging 41.4 hours per week. Students even at an elementary school level are being assigned more homework than parents remember from their school years. With the increasing popularity of standardized tests as early as elementary school, this trend will most likely continue. Add to this mix the variety of sports, scouts, dance and other activities available to children and you can end up with overscheduled kids and frazzled parents. To save your sanity and encourage your kids to lead a more serene life consider these tips:

- Ask your child about his or her real interests. She may have an affinity for a certain hobby, game or activity that you didn't know about. Find out what he or she truly wants to do.
- Limit the amount of activities your child signs up for. Life is all about making choices, for kids as well as adults. It is all right for children to choose one activity or sport per season rather than over-scheduling. If you have more than one child, look at the total commitment before you sign your child up for activities.
- Save some time for family activities and "down time". If your schedule is too hectic for family dinners and activities, you are probably over-scheduled. Children need leisure time for play and relaxation. Without it, they may not fully develop their potential for creativity and spontaneity.

Staying active with your child's activities

One of the most important things parents can do to help ensure their child's satisfaction in an after school activity is to stay involved themselves from the beginning and monitor their child's involvement. Try these tips:

- Do your homework before enrolling your child. Talk with the adults supervising his or her class, sport or hobby. Learn what kind of involvement time will be required of your child and of you. What will your obligations be? Find out about costs, transportation, hours and rules.
- Try to get involved yourself. If your child joins the scouts, consider trying to become a scout leader, for example. Look into joining a parent-child club. Take up a similar hobby to encourage your child-if he or she begins studying piano, consider taking classes, too. Be a good role model. Think about making community involvement or volunteer work your hobby.
- Be there for him or her. Make the effort to attend his or her games, competitions, performances and outings. It's important for both parents to be present whenever possible as supportive spectators. If you're allowed to attend practices and rehearsals, try to attend these, too. Remember to respect the rules, refrain from shouting or criticizing, and avoid embarrassing your child in front of her peers.
- Be supportive. Don't criticize your child's performance. The focus should be on having fun. Participating in an extracurricular activity is supposed to help boost your child's self esteem-yelling at him or her for not making a play in a game or for having trouble with an arts and crafts project will add a negative connotation to the activity and may discourage her from trying. Instead, cheer him or her on and praise his or her efforts, even if he or she didn't achieve what you wanted him or her to.
- Work with your child on improving. Whenever possible, it's best to let him or her develop his or her talents naturally and learn from his or her own mistakes. But there's nothing wrong with offering supportive help. Practice throwing the ball together. Buy him or her the right equipment and supplies he or she needs for a project. Be patient with him or her as he or she makes mistakes, avoid being a "drill instructor" and don't make perfection an obsession.
- Know when to cut back. If your child's after school activity is causing your child to worry, become routinely exhausted or injured, or is interfering with his or her school time or performance, it's probably time to stop the hobby or at least spend less time with it. Talk to your child about what you're observing, and ask how he or she feels about the activity. If he or she doesn't want to quit the activity, try a compromise: perhaps he or she can pick it up again after her grades improve. It's your job as a parent to monitor his or her participation in after school activities closely and to set limits and boundaries that are fair and appropriate.

An after school activity should be a fun, constructive experience for your child that can help build his or her confidence, foster natural interests and strengthen life skills. Enjoy these times and encourage your child to do the same.

If you have other EAP concerns, please call the toll free number, **1-888-290-4EAP** or TDD access at 1-800-697-0353. This employee/family benefit is provided by your employer. "For information related to your everyday concerns, go to www.GuidanceResources.com. "First Time Users" will be prompted for their company ID: **FEDSOURCE**, to register and create your own username and password.

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