

Active, Involved (Overbooked?) Children

Participation in activities may be high, but overscheduling is not a problem

For many American children, there is school and then there is soccer or some other sport, a club meeting or Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts or, perhaps, private dance or music lessons. When it comes to organized activities, the options for children are numerous. The question is: Are children becoming overscheduled to the point that their participation is doing them more harm than good?

Although some news reports and a few parenting books report that today's children are overbooked and may be paying for it with high stress and other problems, a recent study of the issue concludes there is little evidence to suggest that is the generally case.

Expanding Opportunities

The National Survey of America's Families suggests that more than 80% of children ages 6 to 17 years spend part of their free time in one or more sports, lessons or clubs during the year, and nearly 7 million children are enrolled in after-school programs.¹

These organized activities have expanded in recent years for several reasons. They offer children of working parents safety and supervision during off-school hours. Local, state and federal spending to support these activities has increased significantly, particularly for after-school programs. Federal grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers alone rose from \$40 million in 1998 to \$1 billion in 2002.

Perhaps most important, the majority of studies on organized activities report that most children benefit. Their participation contributes to their educational, social, civic, and physical devel-

opment in positive ways.

Overscheduling Hypothesis

Nevertheless, some news reports and a few parenting experts have suggested that children's lives are filled with hurry, stress and pressure due, in part, because of overloaded schedules.

This overscheduling hypothesis is based on several notions. One suggests the main reason children take part in organized activities is perceived pressure from parents or other adults to achieve long-term educational and career goals. Another argues that the extensive amount of time spent in organized activities comes at the expense of traditional family activities, such as dinner together, family outings and casual conversations with parents. A third suggests these children are at greater risk of having adjustment problems and poor relationships with their families due to the inordinate amount of time spent in organized activities.

American children spend an average of about five hours a week in organized activities, such as sports, clubs and lessons. In contrast, studies report, they spend between 13 and 17 hours a week in front of the television.

Such propositions lack a firm basis in empirical research. Most evidence to support them is drawn from studies that indicate how participating in organized activities might affect family life and studies that suggest that perceived pressure from parents and other adults may result in poor adjustment, particularly among children of more affluent families.

However, a review of available research helps to define children's participation in organized activities, including the reasons they participate and how much time they spend in these activities. The scientific evidence also provides insight into the consequences of participating in organized activities and the degree to which overscheduling concerns are justified.

Few Are Overly Involved

An evaluation of data from the Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study for Income Dynamics (PSID)

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suggests that, on average, children spend about five hours a week in organized activities. In contrast, white children spend an average of 13 hours a week watching television and African American children average more than 17 hours in front of the TV.

The PSID consists of a nationally representative sample of 5,000 American families. Data collection began in 1968. Interviews were conducted annually until 1997, then were done on a biennial basis. The CDS was added in 1997 to provide a long-term database of children and their families.

Although it is not clear how many hours constitute “overscheduling,” the PSID-CDS data on adolescents suggest only a small percentage are over-extended. Only about 7% of children ages 12-14 years and only 5% of 15- to 18-year-olds spend 20 or more hours a week in organized activities.

Why They Participate

Several studies have examined why children take part in organized activities such as sports, art, science, after-school programs, and community-based organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCA.

The most common reasons adolescents and pre-adolescents give for participating include enjoyment and excitement; encouragement and support from friends or parents; opportunities to challenge themselves, build their skills and increase their self worth; desire to interact with others; and personal safety.

Pressure from parents and other adults is seldom mentioned as a chief reason for participating in organized activities. And such results are seen across a broad spectrum of children, including talented and highly involved adolescents and children from an economically diverse range of families.

Benefits Of Participation

Research provides much evidence that children benefit from organized activities that offer positive developmental experiences such as physical safety, supportive relationships with peers and adults, exposure to positive social norms and opportunities for skill building.

A study of more than 400 adolescents in grades 6-12, for example, found a significant positive association between the number of hours spent in organized activities and performance on achievement tests.² Another study reports that, among students in grades 10-12, those involved in at least one activity showed either more improvement or less decline over time in school achievement – measures such as grade point average and college attendance and completion – as well as improved feelings of school belonging and higher self-esteem.³

Also, analyses of PSID-CDS data suggest involvement in organized activities benefits adolescents and that a high level of participation has few negative consequences, particularly when compared to adolescents who do not take part in activities. Reading achievement among both white and African-American adolescents, for example, tends to increase with participation in organized

activities up to 20 hours a week.

Highly Involved Youth

However, there is some evidence that there may be a point of diminishing returns among the small proportion of adolescents who are extremely involved in activities. But even then, measures of well-being among highly scheduled adolescents tend to be similar to or greater than adolescents who do not participate in activities at all.

For example, the study that reported a positive association between hours spent in organized activities and the achievement test scores of adolescents noted that the scores of the 2% who spent more than 20 hours a week in activities were only slightly above average.⁴ Nevertheless, their scores were higher than those of students who were not involved in any organized activity.

Policy Implications

In sum, the body of scientific evidence on how participating in organized activities impacts children provides few reasons to be concerned about overloaded schedules. In fact, if the studies raise any concern, it is that children who are not involved at all appear to have the most to lose.

**references**

This report is based on the following publications:

Mahoney, J.L., Harris, A.L., & Eccles, J.S. (2006). Organized activity participation, positive youth development, and the overscheduling hypothesis. *Social Policy Report*, 20, 4, 3-30.

References noted in the text follow:

¹ Afterschool Alliance (2005). *Working families and after school. A special report from America After 3 PM: A household survey on after school in America.* www.afterschoolalliance.org/press archives/Working Families.Rpt.pdf

² Copper, H., Valentine, J.C., Nye, B., & Lindsay, J.J. (1999). Relationships between five after-school activities and academic achievement. *Journal of Education Psychology*, 91, 369-378.

³ Eccles, J.S., Barber, B.L., Stone, M., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59, 10-43.

⁴ Copper, loc. cit.

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