

Did You Know?

The Overscheduled Child

AVOID THE HYPER-PARENTING TRAP

An article by: Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., and Nicole Wise

Are You A Hyper-Parent?

"Hyper-parenting" is the phrase we coined to describe a child-rearing style now prevalent in middle and upper-middle class homes. In these families, parents become over-involved in every detail of their children's academic, athletic and social lives. They over-enrich their children's environment and over-schedule them.

Parenting
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Multiple Activities Leave Parents and Children Frazzled

Contemporary children get so much more than basic schooling. Many also participate on one or more teams, have lessons in music, art, foreign language, and are tutored in school subjects. Although each activity maybe valuable on its own, in aggregate these commitments leave parents and children frazzled, keep children from developing self-reliance, and hurt families.

Where Do Professionals Observe Hyper-Parenting?

Just about everywhere they look! They see it in the parents of middle-class American children—the ones who already have established wonderfully enriching home lives—who still feel compelled to enrich further in order to "maximize" their children's potential. These parents react to the latest science reported in the media—which professionals know is of dubious validity—by broadcasting Mozart into their infant's nurseries to stimulate mathematical ability, enrolling toddlers in organized gymnastics programs (to fine-tune large motor development), and putting children too young to comprehend the rules in competitive team sports. They insist that kids who are barely awake sit for 7 a.m. piano lessons and that high-schoolers manicure their resumes to fit profiles elite colleges supposedly are looking for.

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Parenting Has Become The New Competitive Sport

This is happening because many contemporary parents see their fundamental job as designing a perfect upbringing for their offspring, from conception to college. A child's success—quantified by "achievements" like speaking early, qualifying for the gifted and talented program or earning admission to an elite university—has become the measure of parental accomplishment. Despite knowing in their hearts that their families are over-scheduled, many parents keep rushing because they fear that cutting back could harm their beloved child's future.

That is why the most competitive adult sport is no longer golf. It is parenting. Numerous factors under gird hyper-parenting, over-scheduling and the sleep-deprived children they produce. For one, contemporary parenting expert advice as reported by the media implies that each child-rearing detail has crucial future implications. Where Dr. Spock urged parents to trust themselves, today's parenting advice, with its tone of urgency and authority, raises parental anxiety to a fever pitch. And high anxiety brings out the worst in everyone.

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Everyone knows that prematurity is bad for infants...yet that's what is now being advocated for children!

Schools Cave Into the Pressure, Ignoring What They Know

Schools are often forced to pressure children further, often reacting to demands that they show "results" for the tax dollars they receive with homework that is supposed to enhance future performance. Everyone knows that prematurity is bad for infants yet it is being advocated for children.

The incorrect belief that child development is absolutely linear also contributes to the frenzy, because it implies that any early advantage will keep a child ahead of others. Thus a child who reads early will score higher on the verbal SAT in their teens. So parents feel compelled to "jump start" their children to achieve milestones early and to develop skills faster, and pressure schools to do the same.

For instance, a high proportion of children in private remedial educational programs are already performing above grade level. They are there to get even further ahead. Conversely, children at the lower end of any developmental task are often seen as candidates for emergency intervention. Certainly some children have developmental delays that require intervention—but many children who walk late grow up to be excellent athletes without therapy in pre-school while others who read late become wonderful writers.

Living A Childhood Under The Microscope: *Am I Good Enough?*

How does this life of constant scheduling and judgment, of unending evaluation of life's every aspect—starting from speed-achieving milestones as infants, to early reading proficiency, to advanced achievement at tennis, ballet or creative writing—feel to a child? How would we adults feel if we were scrutinized and graded on every action we took? What reaction might it evoke if, say, our spouse did it to us?

Kids hear the message as:
"I'm not good enough!"

Subliminal Messages Erode A Child's Self-Esteem

Hyper-parenting can damage children's self-esteem. The subliminal message kids get from this constant scrutiny and hyperactivity is that they are inadequate in their current, unpolished state. *"If I am as good as my parents say, why do I need constant enrichment? Likely I'm not very good at all."* This hyper lifestyle is an unappealing vision of the future, which may be why some children get away from parents by burying themselves in Gameboy, Nintendo or computer games, and why others—very bright, promising students—give up on school, say they don't think it's worth it, and drop out early.

Older kids 'opt out' and try to escape in scary ways: depression, cutting (self-injury), suicide, dropping-out, drugs & sex.

We suspect that this hyper-rearing way of life contributes to the increasing incidence of teen-age depression, substance abuse and sexual acting out. So what should parents do? Cutting back just 5 to 7 % in scheduled activities can help families embrace sanity. Character development and interpersonal relationships can become central again, as they should, by de-emphasizing activities and accomplishments.

The Real Meaning of Quality Time

Parents ought to enjoy their adult life, which would make it a more attractive model for children to emulate. Most parents would benefit from rushing a little less and reflecting a little more. Saturday night dinners with a spouse help everyone in the family. Parents who enjoy each other are happier, more relaxed, and can be more genuinely generous. It is even good for kids to be bored sometimes. Dealing with boredom stimulates inner life creativity and imagination. Children need down time to think, discover, imagine, create inner worlds all their own and hear their inner voice, the one that makes them draw this unique picture or to write this unusual story.

What are you modeling?
◆
Is your ANXIETY doing the talking?

Children Need Your BELIEF in Them—Not Your Anxiety!

Surely parents ought to expect their children to make something of their lives. But the most constructive support parents can offer is to communicate sincerely that they know that their child is a good, intelligent, deeply loved person who will grow up successfully. That maximizes the chance of healthy growth. But many parents are too anxious to have that inner conviction. So instead, often without being conscious of doing so, many parents say—

through actions and gestures, if not in actual words—that they are very nervous about their children's future. This subliminal message can undermine a child's self esteem and create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We shouldn't expect
kids to excel.
They are
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still learning!

Childhood Is A Preparation, Not A Full Performance

Children ought to enjoy hobbies and passions rather than working at them like part-time, unpaid jobs. Summers ought to be fun, not just opportunities to polish skills and pull ahead of the competition. Children are not supposed to excel, or even be good, at anything. They are, by definition, immature and unpolished. They are learning!

Families can benefit by doing things whose only purpose is the joy of spending time together, like playing Monopoly, shooting hoops (with no coaching), drawing pictures, or taking a walk. Being unproductive together tells the child that the parent likes the kid, as he or she is.

Give Your Child The Gift of UNCONDITIONAL Love

As the song goes, "I love you just the way you are," is the greatest gift a parent can give, the deep, inner conviction that children don't have to perform for their parents to love and cherish them. Once upon a time that was called "unconditional love." It is what all kids (all human beings, in fact,) need to truly succeed in life. It is what putting an end to over-scheduling and hyper-parenting would help accomplish.

"I love you
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♥

The above article was written by Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., and Nicole Wise. They were co-authors featured on the August 2, 2001, Oprah Winfrey Show on the topic, entitled "What kids really need: The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-parenting Trap" (Griffin 2001)

What Can You Do?

TAKING YOUR LIFE BACK FROM HYPER-PARENTING

- **Cut back your scheduled activities just 5-10 %** and you'll notice a difference.
- **Do a "soul search"** and ask yourself: *What need in myself am I trying to fill through my child? Is this benefiting my child—or me?*
- **Read one of these books:** Perfect Madness: Motherhood In An Age of Anxiety (Judith Warner) or The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-parenting Trap (by Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise) or Endangered Minds (Jane Healy). These books will open your eyes!
- **Protect your children from noise overdoses.** Turn off the sound track in your life. Experiment with intervals of silence, especially if your family has grown accustomed to the background noise of TV and electronics.
- **Stop before you say "yes" to another activity**, and ask yourself if this is truly good for your child? *Does she need more activities, or do I need something for ME in my life, apart from her?*
- **Find meaningful work of your own** if you realize you are living too much "through your child." Even a few hours of doing something that feeds your passion can make a huge difference.
- **Make a commitment to eat together as a family.** Start with twice a week. Get creative. This can be breakfast on Sunday. Or Friday night pizza. Or Sunday dinner. Make it special and fun. Harmony and togetherness matter more than eating everything on your plate. (NOTE: Research shows that kids do better on their SAT scores when they eat together as a family.)
- **Stay off the cell phone when you are out with your child.** When a parent's energy is directed elsewhere, it says to a child, *"You're just not very important. I don't really value being with you right now."* Talking on the phone when you are with your child diminishes the opportunity for language development and connection. Talking together is the best language builder in the world! And, it's communication that builds relationships--plain and simple.
- **Try doing activities just for "the fun of it."** (Forget, for a time, the need to win, do it well, etc.) The goal here is learning to relax and enjoy!

- **Don't feel guilty about skipping events that everyone else attends.** Your child needs you & your attention, NOT more activities. Relationships require *time*...and children need lots of it!
- **Give your child space in their day for pure, unstructured play.** Time for lollygagging. For following their own inclinations. All children need some time that is utterly their own, some time when adults are not calling the shots.
- **You don't have to prove anything to anyone!** Holidays are not a competition; a birthday does not need to be a blow-out! Scale back. Keep the focus on family and meaningful traditions.
- **Birthdays don't have to be big productions.** Celebrate them in a way that honors the qualities you love in your child. Make them expressions of love: a special meal, an outing with a friend, a birthday ritual carried on year after year (a birthday candle on the morning table, etc.).
- **Find a peer who thinks like you do** and gain support for your efforts to "do" less.
- **Set limits and stick to them.** Children play on our guilt. They learn where our soft spots are. Doing what is good for your child doesn't always feel good. Kids resist and rebel. They are trying to see if we really mean what we say. This is the hard work of being a "good" parent.
- **Confront the "I want more, more, more..." syndrome.** More is not always better! Teach children a valuable lesson: to distinguish between NEEDS and WANTS. Advertisers know full well that children are easy prey. Say 'No' to consuming and spending that revolves around instant gratification. Impulse buying only teaches children to look outside themselves when they feel needy or unhappy. Help them accept that they can't have everything they *want*, but they do have everything they *need* (love, acceptance, reassurance, etc.). Also, pausing before meals to give thanks for the abundance of daily life helps children learn gratefulness.
- **Allow your child to experience periods of boredom**—it's good for him to learn to be creative. (Remind yourself that it's not your job to be *the entertainer*! It's your job to teach your child how to handle real life.)
- **Make a date with your spouse.** Use our "Date Night Childcare" here at school. It's good for kids to see you taking care of your "coupleness." It makes them feel more secure, even though they may protest your leaving.
- **Our lives are a series of CHOICES.** Make a commitment to live more consciously. Become more aware of the decisions you are making every day--from the food you choose, to the images you allow into your living room, to the activities you choose, to the atmosphere you create in your home. When in doubt, weigh in on the side of choosing calm over stress and anxiety.
- **Search out ways to soothe yourself.** Practice something new. Exercise. Go to the gym. Walk with a friend. Take up yoga. Practice deep breathing. Play serene music your car (yoga music is great!). Listen to meditation tapes (Go to <http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com> for Jon Kabot-Zinn's *Mindfulness Meditation Tapes/CD's*. Or, go to www.cduniverse.com and look for his DVD for parents, *Mindfulness and Meditation – Stress Reduction/Parenting DVD*.)
- **If you are anxious about your child's future, find someone to talk to.** Your anxiety will communicate itself to your child, whether you mean it to or not. An outsider's viewpoint may give you another perspective or help you to see your blind spots.
- **Stand back. Watch a child closely.** Children have a lot to teach us. About simplicity. About the little things that matter. About staying in the present moment. About love and connection.
- **Above all, strive for balance in your life.** Follow your *own* inner compass!



When I keep my balance,
I feel empowered,
For I am guided then not by fear or pressure,
but by the small quiet voice within that whispers,
"ENOUGH."

(Katrina Kenison, *Mitten Strings*, p. 202)