

The Wellness Family

The Well-Balanced Child

Every parent wants to raise the perfect child: healthy, happy, loved and respected with high achievements and even higher goals. We want our children to “have the things we didn’t have” and to achieve their dreams. This is all well and good, unless we become so focused on our desires for our child that we forget what’s inherently best for the child.

Hyper-Parenting

“Hyper-Parenting” is a phrase that has been coined to describe a dangerous trend in child rearing in middle and upper-middle class homes. In these families, parents become overly involved in every detail of their children’s academic, athletic and social lives. They unnecessarily augment their children’s environment and over-schedule them.

In parents’ heartfelt desire to help children succeed they hinder the kids by not allowing them to simply be children.

Over-Activities

Children today are getting so much more than just basic schooling. Many participate in several of the following extra-curricular activities:

- Sports
- Clubs
- Music lessons
- Art lessons
- Foreign language lessons
- Necessary tutoring.

Individually these activities are valuable but combined they can leave parents and children frazzled.

Some parents claim that they involve their children in these activities to avoid the risk of boredom. What they are forgetting is that boredom is a catalyst for creativity. Boredom can fuel a child’s imagination, while over-scheduling the child doesn’t allow them the opportunity to exercise their innate ability to entertain themselves.

Competitive-Parenting

Raising the perfect child has almost become a competitive sport, with the prize being speaking early,

qualifying for gifted and talented programs, or earning admission to an elite university. These things, and not a well-balanced and happy child, have become the measure of parental accomplishment.

According to Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., “The competitive 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



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insist that kids who are barely awake sit for 7 AM piano lessons and that high-schoolers manicure their resumes to fit profiles elite colleges supposedly are looking for.”¹

Many parents may recognize these characteristics in themselves but, despite the fact that they know their children are over-scheduled, many parents will choose to keep up the pace for fear that cutting back may harm their beloved child’s future.

The Pressure

Where is this pressure coming from? Why do parents feel this overwhelming drive to push their children to not only succeed but to excel? There are several different factors, the first being the latest parenting expert’s advice. There was a time when Dr. Spock urged parents to trust themselves and their instincts.

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Not so today, when experts imply that each decision made for children will have crucial future implications and, with its tone of urgency and authority, raises parental anxiety to a fever pitch and brings out the worst in all concerned.

The pressure also comes from the schools that find themselves at the other end of a pass-the-buck relay race to produce the best and most highly educated children. They have to show results for those tax dollars they've been receiving and they react to the pressure by placing higher demands on the children, usually in the guise of increased homework that is supposed to enhance future performance.

An additional contributing factor is the incorrect belief that child development is absolutely linear. Many parents mistakenly believe that if their child reads early, 15 years down the road they'll score higher on their verbal SATs. So parents push their children to achieve milestones early and to develop skills faster than their counterparts, expecting this will help them achieve greater things in the future.

The End Results

We have to wonder how this kind of life is affecting the children. What are the children feeling when

faced with an endless parade of activities? Consider what damage this could be doing to a developing self-esteem. The subliminal message that kids are getting from this constant scrutiny and hyperactivity is that they are inadequate in their current unpolished state. They convince themselves that if they were acceptable just as they are, then they wouldn't need all of this extra enrichment. They begin to feel inadequate and inferior; this results in children spending more time buried in the Gameboy, Nintendo or latest computer games. Taken to the extreme these children will sometimes go so far as to drop out of school. Feeling that they'll never measure up anyway, they quit trying.

It's also clear that hyper-parenting may possibly be a contributing factor to the increased incidences of teen-age depression and substance abuse.

Conclusion

It's time for parents to realize that their child may not be the next prima ballerina, concert pianist, infielder, quarterback, or President of the United States, but that doesn't mean that they won't have equally fulfilling lives. Even without all of the extra-curricular activities their children are well on their way to being everything they could hope for and more.

1. The Overscheduled Child – Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap by Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D. and Nicole Wise (Griffin 2001)

Top Ten Recommendations to Avoid the Over-Scheduled Child

10. Children should have just one outside activity.
9. To add an activity the child must give up one.
8. Help your child learn to say "no" to activities that don't really interest them.
7. Don't be too quick to say "yes" to new outside or extracurricular activities.
6. Assess your irritability quotient. How often are you yelling at the kids to hurry up because you're running late to a function?
5. Assess your child's irritability quotient. Are they really enjoying their outside activities or is it time to make a change?
4. Resolve to eat dinner together as a family.
3. Give your child down time to spend creatively
2. Make family time a priority. Go to the park, the zoo, etc. at least once a week.
1. Trust your instincts – if it feels like it may be too much, it probably is.

