

Extra-curricular activities

For the modern child, school is just one part of a busy life. Extra-curricular activities offer the opportunity to enhance school-based education but, in recent years, parents have run the risk of 'over-scheduling' their kids in the belief that more is more.

Carol Duncan and **Chris Howe** tell us what they get up to with their kids after the school bell rings for hometime.



HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Excerpt from
Helping Children Find The Right Balance
www.olmcwentworthville.catholic.edu.au/student-support/general-education

Parenting writer, Michael Grose, says that the amount of activities children can handle varies greatly from child to child.

Michael explains that children show obvious signs when they are stressed from participating in too many activities. He said sure-fire signs of excessive child busyness include:

- Children are continually tired and irritable
- Continual refusal to go to activities
- Poor behaviour at transition times
- There is no time for family mealtime
- Anxiety about their performance or progress in an activity or class.

Rest and play time are an important part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for your child. Michael suggests:

- If children take on a new program or activity then consider dropping one they already do.
- Let kids be kids. They don't always have to be productive
- Help them manage their time by writing down all school, social and extra curricular activities on a calendar and display it in a highly visible area. Leave spaces in the calendar or timetable for downtime
- Make sure you have time to teach children the skills of independence such as dressing, cleaning up and cooking
- Encourage kids to swap around activities in childhood – football one season, soccer the next
- Balance between down and busy time

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How much is too much when it comes to after-school activities?
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mum said...

My boys have a little friend that they very rarely see. She's a much-loved only child and I always find her company pleasurable. But her after-

school schedule is terrifying, with numerous dance lessons, piano, swimming and heaven-knows what else. Suffice to say we never see her bouncing around the backyard after school.

My husband and I are probably slacker-parents, but we do have one non-negotiable after-school activity. Our kids started swimming lessons at about six months of age, and I remember telling those tiny little boys as they cried and trembled on the side of the pool for the first couple of years that, "One day you'll find swimming fun! Trust me!" And now they do. I take enormous joy in watching the boys leaping about in the pool like beautiful porpoises, but I'll make them continue lessons for a few years yet. Everything else is optional, except this.

Although optional is an interesting word. Both boys are now learning to play violin. But I'm afraid that for a few years violin lessons won't truly be optional, because I know first-hand how easy it is to become disillusioned with constant practice and repetition, and to then give up.

Soccer, however, *is* optional. Mr 8 loves his sporting activities and wouldn't dream of not playing. On the other hand, Mr 9 never enjoyed soccer and, after copping a ball to the side of the head a couple of years ago simply refused to get involved. He curled up on the ground at my feet and cried. Sadly his team didn't have the greatest of coaches. Mr 8, however, had a wonderful coach - a man whose ability to wrangle small kids running in all directions was admirable and respected by the parents of all the children in his team. He truly made it fun, which is all it should be when you're little.

Then there's gymnastics. Mr 8 loves it but Mr 9 needed a little more persuasion. He now enjoys it as it is an individual pursuit. I hated team sports so I get it. But is gymnastics optional? Probably, although it hasn't been an issue as yet.

So what other things do my boys get up to after school? Well they attend OOSH for a little while each day, but I try to keep it to a minimum. I pick them up as early as I can and we come home and do stuff. We muck around, we leap in the pool, we watch a DVD or cook something yummy. What we don't do is homework. Well, we DO homework but we do the entire week's homework in one afternoon. Or, rather, their grandparents do it with them. For the record, both are retired teachers and both think homework is a waste. Funny, after writing this, I realise that maybe we're not such slacker-parents after all. Although we still rarely see our little neighbourhood friend.

Carol is a journalist and presenter with ABC Local radio in Newcastle. She is the mother of two boys - Alexander, 9, and James, 8 - and claims to have no idea what she'd have done had she had a 'pink one', but assumes that even dainty girl-children do armpit farts. She loves bedtime.



dad said...

It's amazing how many after-school activities have crept into my life - and Jas has only been at school for four weeks. These activities include: organising the trip home; a weekly swimming lesson; cooking; bath; reading and bedtime. In fact, I have so many after-school activities there's no way I'm letting my kids have any.

Okay, from the list above, the swimming lessons don't belong to me. And Jas does have to do her reading primers. But all that other stuff is mine, and it takes up every second between Jas getting home and Jas climbing into bed.. Every one of *my* seconds.

Other parents tell me that in the near future my children will have scores of extra-curricular choices. Music lessons. Horse riding. Sports. Languages such as French. Girl Guides. That's why I currently focus on the essentials: the swimming lessons. The rest of the time she can play with neighbours - preferably outdoors on the streets.

In my typically humble opinion, the only essentials for childhood are swimming, riding a bike and reading. These three activities will not only ensure a great childhood, but they'll prep her for any future after-school activity that may exist. Let's say she picks an activity in the next suburb: riding and walking (which, craftily, she can already do) have her sorted. Reading covers instructions. And, if no particular activity tickles her fancy she can always stave off her boredom by going to the beach.

So: swimming, riding and reading are in. Everything else is out until the three essentials are mastered. In the meantime, the only other after-school activity I approve of can be summed up with: 'Be neither seen nor heard'. To Jas I say, 'Beloved daughter, I don't want to see you. Unless there is a crisis - and I mean someone-has-been-run-over-by-a-car crisis. And I don't want to hear you. I'm too busy cooking a nutritious meal for the whole family to worry about who's not playing fair or what's on the telly. And no, you can't play the Wii.'

So get outside, dear child. Hang out with your friend up the street. They can even come over and you can both jump on the trampoline in

exactly the way the instructions prohibit. Ride bikes. Scoot your scooter. And here's another option: dodge those 4WDs being driven by parents ferrying their kids from one activity to another. Fun, and a life lesson all at once.

No doubt homework is just around the corner for Jas, so before that lands she's going to get more outdoor play with neighbourhood kids than she can poke with a stick. Less activities is actually more activity - and that's always a good thing.

And I reckon my time is currently better spent on my own after-school activities. Jas will grow up fine without piano from the age of five but she'll do better with adventures, a full belly and a bedtime story.

Chris is a dad who didn't know what the meaning of life was until he had kids. He then realised it was to sleep, but it was too late. With two daughters (aged 5 and 2), and twins on the way, idleness isn't an option for few years to come.