

EXTRACURRICULAR PREFERENCES

Establish priorities when choosing activities

For many families, registering kids for extracurricular activities is part of the back-to-school routine. But be careful not to overschedule them and to let them lead the way when choosing activities.

"Sometimes we want to make sure our child does the things we didn't get to do, even when the child resists," says certified parent educator Doone Estey of Parenting Network in Toronto. "I think that's a mistake. It happens more than we think and I think many parents do it unconsciously."

Children often say they want to do something because it looks appealing at the time or because a friend is doing it but once they get started, they change their mind. Should you push them to go?

"We believe transitions are hard for kids so if they're playing a game and you call them to get ready for their activity, they may say they don't want to go," Estey says.

Encourage them to go, perhaps reminding them they'll feel better and can continue playing afterwards. The test is when the child gets to the activity. Are they having a good time? Or do they refuse to leave your side two or three times?

"That means they actually aren't ready," Estey says.

PROMOTE LIFE SKILLS

Don't feel guilty about giving your child a "little push" towards activities that promote life skills, such as swimming and team sports. Be prepared to give it time.

"Nobody really likes lifelong sports when they start because they're hard ... and they don't really become fun until you get good at them. It takes practice," Estey says.

While there's value in just about every extra-curricular activity you can think of, factor in affordability and understand the pressure extracurricular activities place on parents, particularly if you don't have help shuttling kids to and from sports arenas and other venues, says psychologist and author Sara Dimerman, a parenting and relationship expert.

Do you still have time to enjoy dinner as a family several times a week? "A sandwich for dinner in the car three nights a week is not ideal," she says. Don't overlook the importance of downtime. "By occupying our children every waking moment, we don't teach them the value and importance of enjoying their own company during quiet moments."

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Dimerman typically recommends no more than two activities at a time but believes it's OK to add a religious class to the mix if that's important to your family. But one size doesn't fit all and some kids are able to handle more.

Warning signs they're doing too much: they're exhausted and more susceptible to getting sick, their grades are suffering, they're not eating as healthy as you'd like and don't have time to socialize. Warning signs you've got too much on your plate include yelling at your kids more than you'd like.

It's important to allow time for children to do chores or jobs around the house, Estey maintains. "Helping to clean up around the house and with meal preparation is such a big part of life that kids should have some responsibility for that." It's also a mistake to take an activity away as punishment because it could be the one bright spot in their week — an opportunity for them to flourish like they may not at school.



If you have more than one child, find ways to allow each to shine. "One child shouldn't get all of the attention, even if they are a star player," Estey says. "The other should get some time to express themselves in their own way. They deserve to have something of their own."

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