

## INSIGHTS

# Balancing extra-curricular activities for flourishing kids



Being constantly busy seems to have become a standard way of life for modern families. It's unlikely you'll ever hear a parent talk of having plenty of free time on their hands. Unfortunately, that's a statement unlikely to be heard from a lot of modern-day kids either.

The afternoons on family calendars are increasingly filling up with organised after-school activities, and in families with multiple children the logistics of keeping up with all this can be complicated. The strain of ferrying children back and forth, often in different directions, saps families of energy, resources and time.

### We have great intentions

Recent research from the United Kingdom found that the desire for children to succeed is a strong driver for many parents, sometimes causing them to load their children up with extra-curricular activities. While the intentions are good, the method of keeping kids busy is probably questionable.

Other reasons for encouraging extra-curricular activities include: giving kids the best start in life, making friends, keeping fit and healthy, developing interests and preventing boredom. Anecdotal evidence suggests the findings are similar in Australia.

### The cost of being busy

We live at a time where rates of mental illness, particularly anxiety, are climbing. One in seven Australian children have a diagnosed mental illness. That's three in an average classroom. Many more go undiagnosed.

Rushing to activities, late nights and stressed parents aren't the conditions for family members to enjoy flourishing mental health. Too many organised activities detract from time to hang out with friends, to comfortably complete homework tasks, to spend time with family, to get bored and, importantly, to simply play.

### Free play is serious business

Author and research professor of psychology Dr Peter Gray attributes the rise in anxiety, depression, suicide and narcissism among children to the decline of play. Unstructured play is vital for the healthy development of children and teenagers. Through play kids learn to interact with others, develop physical skills necessary for school success and gain confidence they need to interact with peers.

### How much is too much?

# parenting \* ideas

Some children can cope with busy schedules, while others flounder. As a rule of thumb, if your child or young person is struggling in any of these three areas: 1) mental health, 2) schoolwork and studies, 3) their participation in family life then it may be time to reduce their extracurricular load.

Choosing the activities to omit from a schedule can be tricky, as your child or young person may have a different motivation for each. In short, each activity can be 'the one they love.' Here's a good question to ask your child or young person that can make decision-making easier: *'If all of your after-school activities were cancelled, which one(s) would you plead with me to re-enrol you in?'*

Their answers will reveal a great deal about their commitment to each activity. Ideally, kids should be choosing extra-curricular activities that nourish them rather than cause anxiety and stress. Aim for two activity free nights each week so that your child or young person can meet their study and family commitments.

The same principle for balance holds true for weekends. Make sure your kids enjoy some time free from structured activity, so they can refresh and recharge, ready for the week of school that lays ahead.



## **Dr Jodi Richardson**

Dr Jodi Richardson is a mental health and wellbeing educator and author. She has developed her expertise over two decades of professional work in teaching, wellbeing, clinical practice and elite sport, including working for Beyond Blue on the national schools-based initiative for the prevention of depression. Dr Jodi completed a PhD in Physiology, a Bachelor of Applied Science with Honours, and a Bachelor of Education. She is co-author of the highly acclaimed book *Anxious Kids*.