



V is for Vegging Out

Too Much Structure Can Harm Your Child

by Dr. Jenn Berman

Lola loves to perform and aspires to have a career on Broadway. On Mondays and Wednesdays she has dance class, on Tuesdays and Thursdays she has acting lessons, on Friday she has piano lessons, on Saturday she has singing class, and on Sunday she goes to church with her family. Lola also manages one hour each week of homework and one hour each month of volunteer work, as required by her school. Her brother, Max, is the family athlete. He plays soccer every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and basketball every Tuesday and Thursday; he has a conditioning and calisthenics class every Saturday; and he goes to church with his family on Sunday. He does an hour of homework each night and is also responsible for doing one hour of volunteer work each month. Have I mentioned that Lola is six years old and Max is ten?

Kids today are under tremendous pressure to accomplish more and at higher levels than ever before. This pressure comes from their parents, coaches, educators, and peers. Children are encouraged to “get ahead” by learning to read and write before their peers and to start preparing for college while still in grade school. It is increasingly common to see very young children taking multiple extracurricular classes after preschool.

How Bad Is It?

A study performed at the University of

Michigan’s Institute for Social Research followed the lives of over 3,500 children in 1997 to examine how they spent their free time. The study found a 16 percent decrease in unstructured activities when compared to data from 1981. Unstructured activities are considered anything left over after sleeping, eating, and grooming and going to school, daycare, and after-school classes. The study found that in 1997, involvement in sports and other structured activities rose by 50 percent and that even children as young as six years old were spending eight more hours in school each week as well as more time on homework. It has been estimated that, as of 1997, children only had an average of three hours left a week of unstructured time — and that time may continue to shrink. According to a poll of almost nine hundred children ages nine to thirteen conducted by KidsHealth, more than four out of ten kids feel stressed “most of the time” or “always” and cited having “too much to do” as the primary reason for their stress. More than three-quarters of those polled said they longed for more free time.

The frantic scramble to accomplish and perform has left little time for family life. In fact, a study conducted by the University of Minnesota found that family time is disappearing at an alarming rate. Since the 1970s, family vacations, a prime source of family

bonding and communal memories, have declined by 28 percent and family dinners, vital to family communication and unity, have decreased by more than 30 percent. Additionally, a national poll of teens reported the surprising result that the number-one concern among teens (tied with school worries) was “not having enough time with their parents.”

Ten Signs That Your Child Is Getting Enough Downtime

1. He sleeps in one morning a week.
2. She tells you about her solo playtime.
3. He comes up with creative projects to do on his own.
4. She seems relaxed.
5. His calendar is not full.
6. She daydreams.
7. He asks for books, materials for projects, or art supplies.
8. She spends time outdoors.
9. He can entertain himself.

All Work and No Play Makes Jack a Dull Boy

“Downtime,” or time when children are able to freely choose their own activities (or “inactivities”), is important for your children’s overall mental health and development.

Here are some specific reasons why children need this unstructured time:

1. Children need free time to “recharge their batteries.”
2. Children who can spend their free time doing what they want will gravitate toward activities they enjoy, which helps them discover their passions.
3. Free time helps kids learn to regulate themselves. They will naturally be drawn to physical activities when they need to let off steam, to creative activities when they need to explore their imaginations, and to reading or scientific experimentation when they have a need to explore the more cerebral side of themselves.
4. Children who have freedom to choose their own activities are more likely to get in tune with themselves and their bodies, which will help them take better care of themselves as adults.
5. Unstructured time allows children quiet time, which increases their ability to focus and concentrate.
6. Free time allows children to become creative.
7. Children (and adults) tend to get to know themselves best when they spend time alone.
8. Daydreaming helps children to create a sense of future and helps them to set goals.

Running on Empty

Cathy brought her six-year-old daughter, Grace, to me after her pediatrician had ruled out all possible physical causes of her



frequent stomachaches. Cathy suspected that something emotional might be going on but couldn't figure out what exactly. When I met with Grace, she told me all about her friends at school, her homework, and her favorite topic, gymnastics. Grace loved gymnastics and had begged her mom to let her take classes. One class had turned into two, and before they knew it, Grace was training twenty hours a week. While Grace loved training, she missed the free time she used to have and didn't get any joy out of competing. She wasn't developmentally ready for the stress of competition and didn't know how to tell her mother, who had become quite invested in her career.

What many adults don't realize is how much children want their approval and what a strong need kids have to please them. Too often, parents get caught up in the excitement of their children's success, whether it is academic or athletic, and lose their objectivity about how their kids are handling the pressure. Understandably, Cathy was confused when she realized that Grace's stress was related to gymnastics, since Grace had begged to participate in it more and more frequently. Only when Cathy pulled back on her own involvement in Grace's gymnastics and limited Grace's training did her daughter's stomachaches miraculously disappear.

More and more, I see children in my practice who are over-training, over-studying, and generally taking on too much. Some kids are able to tell their parents how they feel, but sadly, many are not. Among those who don't tell their parents are kids who are too young even to understand themselves why they feel so terrible. Many children who aren't able to tell their parents that they need to cut back on an activity or sport experience stress symptoms, such as headaches, bed wetting, stomachaches, sleep problems, anxiety, nightmares, clinginess, or agitation. If you see these symptoms in your child, it may be time to reassess your child's schedule

and allow for some unstructured time.

Peer Pressure

Everyone knows that kids are notorious for falling prey to peer pressure, but it isn't just kids who experience it. Parents put pressure on each other regarding the accomplishments and talents of their children, and this dynamic tends to start very early. It is hard to keep up with the Joneses not only financially but, often, in the opportunities we give our children. In *Perfect Madness*, Judith Warner captures this anxiety well: "Parents know all too well that if they don't groom their children to be winners they will end up, de facto, as losers."

We all want what is best for our children, but at some point we need to look in the mirror and determine what we are doing for our children and what we are doing for ourselves. Pushing too hard doesn't usually create geniuses, but it does tend to create anxious children. We need to pay attention to our children's natural talents and passions, understand where they are in their development and, most of all, pay attention to their cues. When children are overwhelmed and stressed they always let us know, sometimes by telling us and other times by showing us.

When It's Time to Change, You've Got to Rearrange

To give their children the downtime they need and to avoid over-scheduling, most parents have to reexamine the choices they have made so far. This often means making changes. These changes are usually both logistic and emotional.

Here are some suggestions to get you started:

1. Take your cues from your child's behavior.
2. Give your child the opportunity to develop skills in areas that interest her the most without imposing your own judgments.
3. Give your child technology-free time in

which she can do anything she wants (not including television, video games, the Internet, the radio, and so on).

4. Create unstructured family time to give playing games, being creative, and talking to one another a valued place in the family repertoire.
5. Limit extracurricular activities to no more than two at any given time.
6. Give your child a daily dose of free time.
7. Make sure your child's activities are age appropriate.
8. Don't get pressured into signing your child up for activities by teachers, coaches, or other parents.
9. Be a good role model, and show your child that you know how to have unstructured time yourself.
10. Talk to your child about the benefits of downtime.
11. Spend unstructured time with your child in which you do whatever activities she wants; this will allow you to get to know her even better.

The world we live in is very high pressured, and it can be difficult to go against the norms. The trick is finding the perfect balance for your child.

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