

Brief Research-to-Results

Child TRENDS[®]

...we should direct our focus not to the few children and youth who are over-scheduled, but rather to those who do not participate at all.

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THE OVER-SCHEDULING MYTH

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Contrary to popular belief, recent research rejects the notion that most or even many children and youth are over-scheduled and are suffering as a result. In fact, less than one in ten could be described as over-scheduled. Moreover, our research indicates that only six in ten children and youth participate in organized out-of-school activities at any given time,⁴ and links involvement in those extracurricular activities with positive social, behavioral, and psychological outcomes.

WHAT IS THE OVER-SCHEDULING MYTH?

This hypothesis assumes children and youth are overbooked with activities, which supposedly threatens their well-being and family functioning. It is based on three propositions believed to apply to most children and youth. First, the motivation for participation in organized activities is thought to come from external pressures (such as pressure from parents or other adults to attain additional educational or career experience). Second, youth are believed to participate in extracurricular activities to excess. Third, youth and family well-being are felt to be at risk due to the external pressures placed upon youth and the time commitment their activities require.

DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH

Motivations for Participation in Out-of-School Programs

Studies have investigated why children and youth participate in various organized activities such as sports, community service, after-school programs, clubs, and religious youth groups. The most frequent reasons these children and youth (aged 9-19) gave for their participation were enjoyment and excitement,^{5,6,7} encouragement and support from friends or parents,^{8,9,10,11} opportunities to challenge themselves and build their skills,^{3,7,12} anticipated social interaction,⁵ and personal safety.^{3,13} From this list, only the encouragement from friends or parents could be seen as an external pressure similar to those cited in the Over-Scheduling Hypothesis.

How Many Children and Youth Participate in Extracurricular Activities?

At any point in time, approximately 60% of children and youth participate in organized out-of-school activities. Less than one in ten children can be considered over-scheduled.

Time Commitment

Roughly 40% of children and youth do not participate in any organized out-of-school activity. Among those who do participate, they average less than ten hours per week with those commitments. A very small percentage (3%-6%) spends 20+ hours per week participating. Time spent in various out-of-school activities increases from childhood to adolescence, and it fluctuates depending on race, parental education, and the type of activity. Finally, children and youth spend an equal or greater amount of their free time in educational activities, playing games, doing chores and watching television, as they do in organized out-of-school programs.

Effects on Child and Family Well-Being

Research has linked participation in well-run organized activities with positive development. Positive youth development theory and research on organized activities also suggest that the benefits will increase as more time is committed to these activities.^{14,15}

The benefits of participation to children and youth include:

- Physical and psychological safety
- Formation of supportive relationships with peers and adults¹⁶
- Development of occupational and educational aspirations
- Skill building
- Lower rates of alcohol and drug use over time (except among athletes)
- Higher self-esteem
- Higher rates of high school completion
- Increased contribution to family, school, and community at large¹²
- Creation of social opportunities and bonds
- Sense of purpose
- Potential for school, family, and community participation¹²
- Improvement (or less decline) in math and verbal skills

However, spending twenty hours or more per week on extracurricular activities or participating in five or more activities simultaneously has been found to have an adverse effect on some outcomes for participants.^{13,17} Analyses examined where very high amounts of scheduled time were related to a number of outcomes. Over and above the effects of background differences, children and adolescents benefited from all but very high levels of participation. The point at which benefits no longer increase depends on the outcome; but participation up to ten hours per week was almost always positive, and participation up to 15 and even 20 hours per week was generally associated with positive development.

Activity Type

Research indicates lower rates of alcohol and drug use among students who participate in volunteer and/or faith-based activities. Children and youth who participate in out-of-school activities spend most of that time in sports. Interestingly, participating in high school sports predicts higher income and better jobs at age 25. However, participation in more than two sports is associated with a flattening or decline in educational achievement levels. Finally, while athletes are reported to drink more in high school than non-athletes, rates of drug use and smoking cigarettes are lower among athletes.

IMPLICATIONS

Some people believe that children and youth are over-committed and that their well-being and that of their family suffer as a result. However, data indicate that few children could be described as “over-committed”. Instead, many children benefit from safe, constructive alternatives to potentially unsupervised free time. And other children could benefit from participation in such activities, since the evidence indicates that participation can contribute to the social, mental, and physical well-being of children and provide them with useful skills.

Additionally, studies of high-risk youth show that a lack of participation in organized out-of-school activities contributes to poor academic performance, high rates of obesity, school dropout, and crime.^{18,19,20,21} Research shows that academic performance and emotional stability levels off or declines after extracurricular involvement beyond twenty hours per week. However, for high-risk youth, even a high amount of participation could be a welcome alternative to spending time in out-of-school settings that lack adult supervision or opportunities to improve themselves.^{22,23,24}

The research illustrating the positive outcomes of participation in organized out-of-school activities tells us that we should direct our focus not to the few children and youth who are over-scheduled, but rather to those who do not participate at all.

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This brief is adapted from the following article:

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⁴ Data from the National Survey of Children's Health indicate that nearly one in five children (19%) had participated in no activities in the past 12 months. Among children in low-income families, about one in three participated in no activities. (Theokas and Bloch, 2006; See also: Moore, Hatcher, Vandivere and Brown, 2000)

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