

The Overscheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap

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"Hyper-parenting" is the phrase we coined to describe a child-rearing style now prevalent in middle and upper-middle class homes. In these families, parents become over-involved in every detail of their children's academic, athletic and social lives. They over-enrich their children's environment and over-schedule them.

Contemporary children get so much more than basic schooling. Many also participate on one or more teams, have lessons in music, art, foreign language, and are tutored in school subjects. Although each activity may be valuable on its own, in aggregate these commitments leave parents and children frazzled, keep children from developing self-reliance, and hurt families.

Where do professionals observe hyper-parenting? Just about everywhere they look! They see it in the parents of middle-class American children—the ones who already have established wonderfully enriching home lives—who still feel compelled to enrich further in order to "maximize" their children's potential. These parents react to the latest science reported in the media—which professionals know is of dubious validity—by broadcasting Mozart into their infant's nurseries to stimulate mathematical ability, enrolling toddlers in organized gymnastics programs (to fine-tune large motor development), and putting children too young to comprehend the rules in competitive team sports. They insist that kids who are barely awake sit for 7 a.m. piano lessons and that high-schoolers manicure their resumes to fit profiles elite colleges supposedly are looking for.

Parenting as a Competitive Sport

This is happening because many contemporary parents see their fundamental job as designing a perfect upbringing for their offspring, from conception to college. A child's success—quantified by "achievements" like speaking early, qualifying for the gifted and talented program or earning admission to an elite university—has become the measure of parental accomplishment. Despite knowing in their hearts that their families are over-scheduled, many parents keep rushing because they fear that cutting back could harm their beloved child's future.

That is why the most competitive adult sport is no longer golf. It is parenting. Numerous factors undergird hyper-parenting, over-scheduling and the sleep-deprived children they produce. For one, contemporary parenting expert advice as reported by the media implies that each child-

rearing detail has crucial future implications. Where Dr. Spock urged parents to trust themselves, today's parenting advice, with its tone of urgency and authority, raises parental anxiety to a fever pitch. And high anxiety brings out the worst in everyone.

Schools are often forced to pressure children further, often reacting to demands that they show "results" for the tax dollars they receive with homework that is supposed to enhance future performance. Everyone knows that prematurity is bad for infants yet it is being advocated for children. The incorrect belief that child development is absolutely linear also contributes to the frenzy, because it implies that any early advantage will keep a child ahead of others. Thus a child who reads early will score higher on the verbal SAT in their teens. So parents feel compelled to "jump start" their children to achieve milestones early and to develop skills faster, and pressure schools to do the same.

For instance, a high proportion of children in private remedial educational programs are already performing above grade level. They are there to get even further ahead. Conversely, children at the lower end of any developmental task are often seen as candidates for emergency intervention. Certainly some children have developmental delays that require intervention—but many children who walk late grow up to be excellent athletes without therapy in pre-school while others who read late become wonderful writers.

Childhood Under a Microscope

How does this life of constant scheduling and judgment, of unending evaluation of life's every aspect—starting from speed-achieving milestones as infants, to early reading proficiency, to advanced achievement at tennis, ballet or creative writing—feel to a child? How would we adults feel if we were scrutinized and graded on every action we took? What reaction might it evoke if, say, our spouse did it to us?

Hyper-parenting can damage children's self-esteem. The subliminal message kids get from this constant scrutiny and hyperactivity is that they are inadequate in their current, unpolished state. "If I am as good as my parents say, why do I need constant enrichment? Likely I'm not very good at all." This hyper lifestyle is an unappealing vision of the future, which may be why some children get away from parents by burying themselves in Gameboy, Nintendo or computer games, and why others—very bright, promising students—give up on school, say they don't think it's worth it, and drop out early.

We suspect that this hyper-rearing way of life contributes to the increasing incidence of teen-age depression, substance abuse and sexual acting out. So

what should parents do? Cutting back just 5-7 percent in scheduled activities can help families embrace sanity. Character development and interpersonal relationships can become central again, as they should, by de-emphasizing activities and accomplishments.

The Real Meaning of Quality Time

Parents ought to enjoy their adult life, which would make it a more attractive model for children to emulate. Most parents would benefit from rushing a little less and reflecting a little more. Saturday night dinners with a spouse help everyone in the family. Parents who enjoy each other are happier, more relaxed, and can be more genuinely generous. It is even good for kids to be bored sometimes. Dealing with boredom stimulates inner life creativity and imagination. Children need down time to think, discover, imagine, create inner worlds all their own and hear their inner voice, the one that makes them draw this unique picture or to write this unusual story.

Surely parents ought to expect their children to make something of their lives. But the most constructive support parents can offer is to communicate sincerely that they know that their child is a good, intelligent, deeply loved person who will grow up successfully. That maximizes the chance of healthy growth. But many parents are too anxious to have that inner conviction. So instead, often without being conscious of doing so, many parents say—through actions and gestures, if not in actual words—that they are very nervous about their children's future. This subliminal message can undermine a child's self esteem and create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Childhood is a preparation, not a full performance. Children ought to enjoy hobbies and passions rather than working at them like part-time, unpaid jobs. Summers ought to be fun, not just opportunities to polish skills and pull ahead of the competition. Children are not supposed to excel, or even be good, at anything. They are, by definition, immature and unpolished. They are learning!

Families can benefit by doing things whose only purpose is the joy of spending time together, like playing Monopoly, shooting hoops (with no coaching), drawing pictures, or taking a walk. Being unproductive together tells the child that the parent likes the kid, as he or she is. As the song goes, "I love you just the way you are," which is the greatest gift a parent can give, the deep, inner conviction that children don't have to perform for their parents to love and cherish them. Once upon a time that was called "unconditional love." It is what all kids (all human beings, in fact,) need to truly succeed in life. It is what putting an end to over-scheduling and hyper-parenting would help accomplish.

Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., and Nicole Wise are co-authors of, featured on the August 2, 2001, Oprah Winfrey Show on the topic, entitled "What kids really need." The Over-scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-parenting Trap (Griffin 2001)