

Demanding schedules can wear parents down

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by Karina Bland - Jan. 29, 2009 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Ten-year-old Maina Dove's schedule is packed: chess club on Wednesdays, drawing on Thursdays and swimming three times a week.

Her sister, 11-year-old Reshma, runs cross country twice a week and goes to martial-arts class on Saturdays. On Wednesdays, she takes a math class for fun. Both girls are in choir and drama, and they love every minute of it.

It's their poor mom who's frazzled.

Research contradicts a common perception that today's children are members of an overscheduled and stressed-out generation. But while more studies indicate kids are doing fine, their parents are feeling overwhelmed, especially while trying to get one kid to dance class, another to soccer and, oh, don't forget to stop at the grocery store in between.

"There are times when I look at my life, and I think, 'Who is running this life?' because it doesn't feel like it's me," said Melissa Townsend of Gilbert, a mother of three.

Maina and Reshma's mom, Shaila Parthasarathi of Tempe, said, "I'm thinking of getting a chauffeur's cap."

Too much, too soon

At Gold Medal Swim School in Chandler, Reshma sat with her mom, who quizzed her on spelling, while Maina swam. Reshma got each word right.

"Stunning," her mom said.

As a child, Parthasarathi took ballet and violin and played netball and lacrosse. Now she carries a dog-eared planner to keep up with her girls' schedules.

Parents want to give their kids every opportunity - piano, dance, baseball. Fliers come home from school continually announcing tennis, computer classes and more.

"There are just so many fantastic things they can do," Parthasarathi said.

All those activities make for a well-rounded kid, and busy kids typically are too busy to get into trouble. But it's a big time commitment for parents.

Parthasarathi likes that the girls meet new friends from all backgrounds and become part of the community. Maina would love to

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add ceramics and dance to her activities, and Reshma wants to try rock climbing. But Parthasarathi said they're doing too much already.

"It's just too crazy," she said.

Parthasarathi was a training manager at Nike's European headquarters before the family moved to Arizona in 2007. She couldn't imagine running around as much if she worked full time (her husband is head of the dance department at Arizona State University).

She and her daughters spend so little time at home that Parthasarathi joked that they don't really need a house, just a tent in the back of the car. But she does make sure the family sits down for dinner together every night, to ensure a sense of normalcy.

Finding a balance

A heavy load of scheduled activities would seem to stress children, but that's not the case, found Sandra Hofferth, a sociologist and director of the Maryland Population Research Center at the University of Maryland at College Park. Her research discovered that active children thrive emotionally.

In the study released earlier this year, Hofferth tracked 331 children ages 9 to 12

from middle- and upper-middle-class families nationwide. The kids who were best off were the 58 percent with what she called a more balanced approach: one or two activities, for less than four hours per week. But highly involved children, about 25 percent, did almost as well.

The kids who were most at risk of being depressed, anxious and alienated were the 17 percent with nothing to do.

Reshma and Maina said they'd be bored if they weren't in so many activities.

"I'm not the kind of person who can just sit around," Reshma said. "I like being busy."

Scott Herrmann, a Phoenix child psychologist and father of a 6-year-old, said, "We live in a very demanding society, and people who multitask or are engaged do better. If the kids are just sitting in front of the television all day and bored, they may find some unproductive ways to spend their time."

But the new research is controversial among those who say too many activities can stress children. The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, warned in 2006 that a busy lifestyle could create anxiety or contribute to depression.

All those activities may be too much for

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Mom and Dad if they're not careful, spending too much time and money.

Atticus, the 11-year-old son of Gilbert mom Townsend, is involved in hockey, baseball and gymnastics and plays the cello.

Townsend's 8-year-old daughter, Hazel, plays hockey and is in a running club at school. Five-year-old Edith is in gymnastics, softball and Daisy Scouts. Townsend coaches both girls' softball teams.

With so much going on, Townsend makes sure to make time for herself. She manages a Queen Creek Starbucks and has Wednesdays off, at times taking that day to hike in Flagstaff.

"It's a chance to be an individual, not the coach, wife or mother," she said.

The family goes to church together. And Townsend and her husband, Dale, make time for each other, leaving the kids at their grandparents' house for a few hours so they can be together.

Herrmann tells parents to limit kids' activities if they are stressing family life. Space out activities to avoid overlap.

"If the parent is enthusiastic and willing to make it a sacrifice and doing it with a joyful heart, then it's fine," he said. "If the parents

are stressed and overcommitted, they're going to relay that to the children as well."

It's a matter of finding balance, Herrmann said. Parents may need to actually pencil in pockets of down time on the calendar, so kids can relax and play outside - and Mom and Dad can unwind.

Reshma has dropped gymnastic, and Maina won't sign up for a second term of chess or drawing, their mother said. Nor will the girls sign up for another drama production.

"The girls tried out some fun new activities, and we all agree it's better to focus on developing just one or two skills, but we are adding yoga to help us all achieve physical flexibility and mental relaxation," Parthasarathi said. "It's all about balance."

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