Parenting Exchange
Parenting Tips #2 Library

by Karen Stephens

Adequate Leisure-time is Essential for Children

Spring has barely sprung, yet announcements for scheduling children's summer days and evenings are filling my mailbox. Advertisements for enrichment camps, specialty lessons, novel recreation opportunities, and performance activities abound.

The bounty of children's opportunities reflects the rich resources we have created for them. After all, every parent wants to give children all life has to offer. We don't want our kids to miss out on any opportunity, especially if we feel short-changed in our own childhood. But if parents don't consider children's overall needs, some very well-intentioned parents will unwittingly over-schedule children. Childhood days should not rival the frantic pace of a corporate calendar. Those days will come soon enough for kids.

Some of today's children don't have time to fit any spontaneous and simple fun into their daily lives. They are at computer camp and math class and gymnastics class and poetry class and foreign language class and cooking class and, and, and . . .

> "To develop as unique and relaxed individuals, children absolutely need plenty of *down-time*."

When I scan all the options, I fear parents are tempted to *buy into* some baseless assumptions — for instance, the assumption that an experience with a price tag is more important to kids than leisure time is. Another dangerous assumption is that kids are wasting time and not learning something if they aren't in a *structured* lesson or classroom setting.

I believe just the opposite is true. To develop as unique and relaxed individuals, children absolutely need plenty of *down-time*. They need slow-paced, unfettered reflection and daydreaming time. Parents need to keep moderation in mind when enrolling children in enrichment programs. Take advantage of some lessons and camps, but focus on the few best suited to your child's age, abilities, personal passions, and unique curiosity.

If parents over-schedule kids, they can end up with unintended results. Over-enrolling can burden kids with stress, fatigue, and emotional burn-out, rather than the blessings parents intend. Giving kids too much too fast comes with a hidden cost. Kids end up experiencing life more with others and *less* with their own family. Too much separation from family undermines stable, secure attachments to parents or siblings.

Over-scheduling of lessons becomes a family's *calendar-nightmare.* It's hard to keep track of which child has swim lessons, whose self defense class does NOT meet this week, whose soccer game has been moved to another field, and who needs a medical clearance before they can do anything. The enrichment never stops. The dropping in and out of child care classrooms never stops. The hopping in and out of the car never stops. Over-the-top scheduling is robbing kids of the luxury of a leisurely childhood embraced by close friends and family.

Reflecting on my own childhood, summer hours seemed to stretch forever. I could wile away afternoons lying on a grassy knoll, trying to find lambs or Abe Lincoln's beard in the clouds. Mud puddles begged to be played in. Handmade dandelion

chains became pretend jewelry. My bike tires rarely cooled before my next ad-hoc adventure rolled around. My dog went through boxes of dog biscuits as I spent hours teaching her new tricks. Do your kids have such creative childhood memories to cling to?

Please, don't get me wrong. Enrichment classes can be great for kids, but enrolling a child in one or two classes at a time is enough. When children are entertained and adult-directed every waking minute, when will they learn to occupy themselves in productive and rewarding exploration? If never given leisure time to think their own thoughts and make their own plans, how will children get to know who they really are — separate from what others tell or teach them?

Before you enroll your kids in a bunch of enrichment classes, ask yourself if you could keep up with your child's planned schedule. If not, pare the schedule down to those activities that will be most engaging and flat-out fun for kids. Your children will reap the rewards of relaxation and cherished home-grown memories as a result.

For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at www.ChildCareExchange.com.

■ ***Nature Connections*** • *Children Honor Mother Nature When Exploring Spring*
• *Butterfly Garden Activities Stir Children's Sense of Wonder*
• *Camping Brings Children Closer to Nature and Family*
• *Bird Watching Helps Children Become Nature-wise*
• *Nature Connections for Kids in Cities and Suburbs*
■ ***Humor*** • *Humor: No joke, it's a Learning Tool for Kids*
• Parenting Tips • *Tips for Keeping Family Life Balanced*
• *Parents Are Powerful Role Models for Children*

— Additional resources available in Article Archives at www.ChildCareExchange —
• *From a Parent's Perspective — No 'Hang' Time* by Roslyn Duffy

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

© Exchange Press 2003