

Signs That Kids Are Too Busy

Sooner or later, kids who are too busy will begin to show signs. Every child is different, but overscheduled kids may:

- feel tired, anxious, or depressed
- complain of headaches and stomachaches, which may be due to stress, missed meals, or lack of sleep
- fall behind on their schoolwork, causing their grades to drop

Over-scheduling can also take a toll on kids' friendships and social lives. Family life also can suffer — when one parent is driving to basketball practice and the other is carpooling to dance class, meals are missed. As a result, some families rarely eat dinner together, and may not take the extra time to stay connected.

Tips for Busy Families

Even those parents who try to help their kids cut back on some activities can run up against coaches who won't tolerate absences and kids who want to keep up with their friends. However, it's important for parents to step back and make sure that their kids aren't burning out.

The key is to schedule things in moderation and choose activities with a child's age, temperament, interests, and abilities in mind. If something's too advanced, the experience is likely to be frustrating. If it isn't engaging, kids will be bored. And when kids do something only to please their parents, it defeats the whole purpose.

Depending on a kid's age and interests, it's possible to set reasonable limits on extracurricular activities and make them more enjoyable for all.

Here are some simple suggestions:

- **Agree on ground rules ahead of time:** For instance, plan on kids playing one sport per season or limit activities to two afternoons or evenings during the school week.
- **Know how much time is required:** For example, will there be time to practice between lessons? Does your child realize that soccer practice is twice a week, right after school until dinnertime? Then there's the weekly game, too. Will homework suffer?
- **Keep a calendar to stay organized:** Display it on the refrigerator or other prominent spot so that everybody can stay up-to-date. And if you find an empty space on the calendar, leave it alone!
- **Even if kids sign up for the season, let them miss one or two sessions:** Sometimes taking the opportunity to hang out on a beautiful day is more important than going to one more activity, even if you've already paid for it.
- **Try to carpool with other parents to make life easier.**
- **Try to balance activities for all of your kids — and yourself:** It hardly seems fair to expend time and energy carting one kid to activities, leaving little time for another. And take time for yourself, to do the things you enjoy, and to spend time together as a family.
- **Create family time:** If you're eating pizza on the run every night, plan a few dinners when everyone can be home at the same time — even if it means eating a little later. Schedule family fun time, too, whether it's playing a board game or going on bike ride or hike.
- **Set priorities:** School should come first. If kids have a hard time keeping up academically, they may need to drop an activity.
- **Know when to say no:** If your child is already doing a lot but *really* wants to take on another activity, discuss what other activity or activities need to be dropped to make room for the new one.
- **Remember the importance of downtime:** Everyone needs a chance to relax, reflect on the day, or just do nothing.

Slow It Down

Take a moment and think about your child's life. If it's hectic, sit down together and decide where you can cut back. If it's overly structured, set aside time for blowing off some steam.

Riding a bike, taking a walk, playing a game, listening to music, or just doing nothing for a while can give kids some much-needed downtime. And never forget how important it is for kids to simply get together to play. Kids need time to just be kids.