

# When doing “nothing” is actually “doing something”

Children need downtime to play and discover themselves

Soccer, ice skating, chess club, ceramics, baseball, gymnastics, music lessons, ballet, and scouting. To some parents, this looks like a list of suggested activities their children might enjoy. To others, however, it actually *is* the list of their children’s activities.

With so many clubs, teams, and activities available to children these days, it can be difficult for some to focus on their favorites without feeling like they are missing something. Elementary school students are just beginning to discover what they like, and therefore, often choose to get involved in as many activities as possible without really thinking about how this will affect their time. They fill up their schedule (and yours) to the point where free time, meals, even bathing have to be penciled in on the family’s activities calendar.

While there is plenty of research proving that children who are involved in extracurricular activities reap important benefits (i.e., higher levels of self-confidence and academic performance, more involvement with school, fewer behavior problems), some experts contend that overscheduled children are being denied the benefits of free time—unstructured parts of their day when they can explore, discover, and imagine. According to a 2006 study from the American Academy of Pediatrics, unstructured playtime might be just as important for a child’s development as academics and sports.

“Unstructured play allows children to pursue their interests, express their personalities, and learn how to structure their time,” says Alvin Rosenfeld, M.D., a child psychiatrist and author of *The Overscheduled Child*. “Play is the natural mode of learning for young children, but when their lives are dominated by too many adult-organized activities, there may be little time left to just be kids.”

The dilemma—for parents and experts alike—is how to strike a balance between programmed activities and free play.

## Keeping your child’s schedule in check

Some parents say there is a temptation to over schedule their children—or allow their children to sign up for too many activities or summer camps—because everything looks good.

“It’s like being in a candy store and trying to choose a treat,” explains a mother of 10-year-old twins. Yet, just as parents wouldn’t let their child buy everything in the candy store, neither should they let their kids choose too many activities.

Samuel T. Gladdings, author of *Family Therapy: History, Theory, and Practice*, has a rule of thumb for extra-curricular activities: “Three’s a crowd,” he says.

Overdoing it by trying to squeeze in too many activities can cause some children to burn out from the stress and frustration of constantly going from one activity to the next.

Keep in mind that this rule doesn’t apply to every child, but rather it’s a starting point. Some children might only be comfortable being a member of one team, while other kids are able to handle three or more after-school activities. To ensure that your child’s extra-curricular fun is not becoming a burden, keep a close eye on his or her behavior and look for signs of an “overscheduled” child. (See sidebar: Is your child overscheduled?)

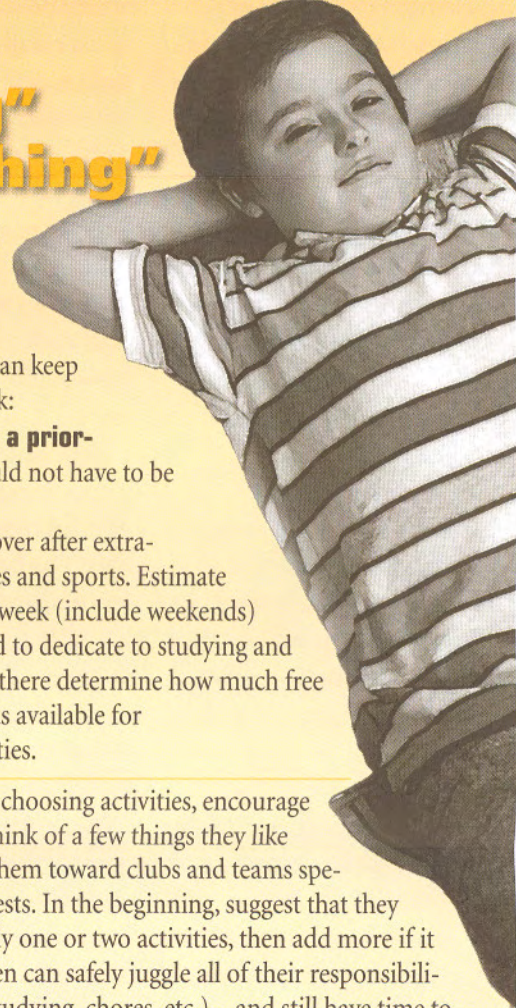
Here are some suggestions for how you and your child can keep activity time in check:

- **Make academics a priority.** Studying should not have to be squeezed into the time left over after extra-curricular activities and sports. Estimate how much time a week (include weekends) your children need to dedicate to studying and homework. From there determine how much free time your child has available for after-school activities.
- **Set limits.** When choosing activities, encourage your children to think of a few things they like doing, then steer them toward clubs and teams specific to these interests. In the beginning, suggest that they get involved in only one or two activities, then add more if it seems your children can safely juggle all of their responsibilities (homework, studying, chores, etc.)—and still have time to ride bikes or play a game of kickball with the neighborhood kids.
- **Understand the commitment levels.** Some clubs or teams might only meet for one or two hours a week, while others might meet multiple times a week and include weekend events. Before signing your child up for these activities, ask the coach or instructor for the schedule so you can determine if this activity fits in with your family’s schedule.
- **Remain flexible.** It’s important to let children know they can choose different activities next year if they try one that they do not want to continue. Children need to understand that it’s OK if they don’t like everything they try. Try to avoid letting children quit a team or activity midway through the year. It’s unfair to the other children involved who depend on your child, and it can set a bad example for later in life.

## Is Your Child Overscheduled?

The amount of extra-curricular activities a child can handle depends upon the individual, but educators and child-development experts say that children may be doing too much if they display any of the following traits:

- Have trouble playing alone or figuring out what to do with “un-programmed” leisure time.
- Have difficulty developing relationships with other children.
- Are often moody, anxious, irritable, or frequently exhausted.
- Have unrealistically high expectations of what they must accomplish and are too hard on themselves.
- Find excuses to skip planned activities.
- Don’t have enough time to complete homework or study for tests and their grades begin to fall.
- Have difficulty making age-appropriate choices on their own.



# Did you know...?

## Recess Helps Kids Learn

Can you remember longing for recess period? Back in elementary school, it was the time when you were set free to run around, jump up and down, swing through the air, or toss a ball with friends. Young students may see recess as just a time for fun, but the unstructured playtime also helps improve learning in the classroom.

Schalmont students in grades 1 through 5 have a 25-minute recess period every day at all three elementary schools. (Kindergartners do not have recess because they are in school for only half of a day.) In good weather, students play outdoors on fixed playground equipment or with jump ropes, basketballs, squishy balls, sidewalk chalk, etc. In bad weather, they often play indoors with similar equipment, much of it provided by each school's Parent-Teacher Organization.

"We like to keep kids active during recess in a non-school-work way," said Brian Hunt, principal of Mariaville Elementary School. "It revitalizes them and makes them ready to learn in the afternoon."

Hunt said Mariaville students are eager to participate in recess, and he encourages

parents to make sure their children are properly attired for outdoor play. This is especially important in cold weather, but the school nurse does have extra gloves and hats to loan out. Mariaville also offers a special indoor recess program, the Mileage Club, where students can walk laps in school hallways and keep track of how many miles they've covered.

Jefferson Elementary School introduced its own special recess program this fall. The buddy system program teamed fifth graders up with first graders during recess so the younger students could learn about cooperative play. According to Assistant Principal Beth Bini, "First graders may not know how to approach a group and ask to play or how to go to another friend if someone doesn't want to play right now." The partnership with fifth graders exposed them to more mature play concepts.

Recess allows all students to move around, release energy and socialize. "Then they come back to the classroom refreshed and ready to learn," said Bini.

Over the last few

years, PTOs and grant organizations have helped keep Schalmont elementary playgrounds and equipment up to modern play and safety standards. At both Mariaville and Jefferson, PTO organizations have helped pay for renovations to school playgrounds and donated hundreds of dollars in play equipment. Just three years ago, Woestina Elementary redid its playground thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Wright Family Foundation and almost \$6,000 in community donations collected through PTO fundraisers. Such generous support has allowed Schalmont schools to continue to give students access to the mental and physical benefits of unstructured play time.

Woestina Principal Shari Lontrato said, "Our students love the playground, and we love that the play time helps them succeed in school."



## mark your Calendar

### May

- 2 Mariaville – Bingo Movie Night, 7 p.m.
- 3 Mariaville – Fun Fair, Noon
- 5 Woestina – Walk for Hunger, 3 p.m.
- 6 Jefferson – Grade 1 Concert @ HS, 7 p.m.
- 7-9 Mariaville, Woestina – Book Fair
- 8 Woestina – Kindergarten Screening, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.
- 9 Mariaville – Kindergarten Screening, 9 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
- 12-16 Jefferson – Kindergarten Screening
- 12 Board of Ed. Meeting @ MS LGI, 7 p.m.
- 13 Mariaville – PTO Meeting, 6:30 p.m.
- 16 Woestina – Wacky Night, 6 – 8 p.m.
- 20 SCHOOL BUDGET VOTE @ HS, 6 a.m. – 9 p.m.
- 21 Woestina – Morning Program, 9:15 a.m.
- PTO Meeting, 6 p.m.
- 23-26 NO SCHOOL – Memorial Day
- 27 Board of Ed. Meeting @ MS LGI, 7 p.m.
- 28 All-district 4th-, 5th- & 6th-Grade Band & Chorus Concert @ HS, 7 p.m.
- 30 Mariaville – PTO Ice Cream Social

### June

- 4 All Elementary Schools – Grade 5 Friendship Games
- Grade 6 Orientation @ MS, 6:30 p.m.
- 9 Board of Ed. Meeting @ MS LGI, 7 p.m.
- 11 Jefferson – K-3 Field Day
- Mariaville – Field Day
- 13 Woestina – PAC Meeting, Noon
- Mariaville – Family Movie Night, 7 p.m.
- 17 Woestina – K-5 Field Day, 9 a.m.
- School Picnic & Volunteer Reception, Noon – 3 p.m.
- 19 Jefferson – 4-5 Field Day
- 23 Board of Ed. Meeting @ MS LGI, 7 p.m.
- 24 Woestina – Grade 5 Graduation, 9:30 a.m.
- 25 Woestina – K-4 Moving Up Ceremony, 10 a.m.
- Jefferson - Moving Up Day, 9:30 a.m.
- Mariaville – Moving Up Night, 7 p.m.
- 26 LAST DAY OF SCHOOL
- Elementary Report Cards Distributed