

In Defense Of the Overscheduled Child

by Erin Mantz

When the thought-provoking book *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* by Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise came out in April 2001, I was more than eight months pregnant with my first son, Max. While I was busy stockpiling newborn diapers and pondering baby names, moms and the media were buzzing about this bold new declaration criticizing hyper-parents — parents who scheduled every aspect and hour of their children's lives. Evidently, kids were being shuttled through a high-speed course of classes, playdates and practices. Some kids had one or two commitments every day of the week. I was appalled at this commotion. "How could moms do this?" I wondered. Then, I had Max.

Fast forward six years, and I am constantly asking myself, "How can *I* be doing this?" My son's life is packed — an overscheduled mixture of kindergarten soccer, tae kwon do, baseball, Hebrew school and playdates. And that's just the spring schedule. In the winter, I somehow squeeze in ice-skating lessons and worry that there is no time for art. Sometimes, I shake my head in wonder of how I got to this point. Today, one day after his kindergarten "graduation," I try to strengthen my resolve to let him have a bit of a lazy summer.

Like many moms, I have fallen victim to wanting the best and the most for my kids. Part of that means making every effort to position my son for stimulation and success. I swear, for myself and many moms I know, my intentions are only the best. I sign Max up for sports classes, not because he might be the next Gilbert Arenas, but because he needs exercise and socialization. In our Potomac suburb, I create a set and busy schedule to keep Max from sitting around the house or in front of an Xbox after school. I keep sending him to tae kwon do classes twice a week because I see his self-confidence building with every new kick. I signed him up for art class because he drew a picture of a rocket ship that seemed so real I could almost see it rising. He joins football teams because I see him trying to throw a pass like Jason Campbell and hear his excitement about wearing "his" team's jersey. And I still worry because we have not yet started tennis or made time for a music class.

Why do I do this? While he is a 6-year-old, I want him to explore lots of things and let his favorite pastimes rise to the top. Then, I can focus his time a bit better the next year. I also find history repeating itself. I was a busy child, too — and I loved it. I remember heading to track practice and tap dancing lessons, drama and Brownies. I don't recall feeling rushed or pressured to do so. I also remember having free time to wander around the gigantic Indian Boundary Park that bordered my Chicago apartment, bike ride, run around with neighborhood friends and throw stones into the frog pond. I liked being busy. I still do. And so does Max.

I rely on a schedule and structure to get us through each day. The social aspects of all this shuttling around and planning playdates also come into play. While some call it

overscheduling, I consider it a proactive way to be sure Max makes friends and develops those relationships. He will need them, like every boy does.

And, I admit, when it comes to staying social, perhaps some selfishness exists on my part. Getting out is good for me, too. Moms are making friends with other moms. I see it all the time. We make more playdates and plans with the moms we hit it off with the most (assuming the kids get along of course). We chat during the kids' classes and gossip at the pool while they swim. We get more connected to the community and try to make our houses feel like homes by hanging on to schedules that keep us from going insane sitting around the playroom. For moms like me whose husbands often aren't coming home for dinner, there's a sense of freedom from the time clock and a kind of frazzled, end-of-day feeling that's easier to beat when we're busy.

I would argue, if asked, that my son *is* overscheduled, but that he loves what he's doing each day. He's happy. I know, because I ask him all the time if he's sure he wants to sign up for this or that and if it will be too tiring. Most of the time, I let him decide, and he's almost always game to get involved in something. Some people might say I'm letting him decide too much. After all, he's only six. But, he seems to think carefully before he answers, and has no trouble saying "No" when he doesn't want something. So, I schedule him. I put him in places where he can discover his strengths and build new skills, and in positions to meet kids and forge friendships.

This summer, I am trying to stop the overscheduling madness — just for the summer. I signed him up for camp (granted, eight weeks of all-day camp) and swore that would be it. None of the recommended tae kwon do classes over the summer. No swim team. Just camp. Yet, over the past three weeks, as kindergarten has wound down, as he passed his tae kwon do test and many friends signed up for swim team, my resolve has weakened. I've had conversations with other parents and thought maybe I should change my mind. Just yesterday, I saw an ad for a great art school and asked Max if he wanted to do art class on Saturdays this summer. (He said "No.") I've had second thoughts about him missing out on building skills or things his best buddies are doing. I held firm to my resolve — until today. While hanging out at the pool, tryouts happened to begin for pre-team — a swim group for his age and stage of swimming. His friends were trying out, and he suddenly decided he wanted to, too. I didn't hold him back. I watched my son, who has been afraid to go underwater for years, willingly put his head under when the coach asked — just so he could be part of the team.

As I write this in June, I am already planning for fall. September will come soon enough, and the busy season of sports schedules and everything else will take over because I'll let it. I'm forming his first grade football team, signing him up for soccer, scheduling tae kwon do and Sunday school and getting trained to be his Cub Scout troop co-leader. I'll carve out hours for playtime, playdates, homework, and our special tradition of "Mom and Max time" — little trips for ice cream, tacos or talks without his little brother or friends.

Despite what *The Over-Scheduled Child* may say, I am not in pursuit of perfection. I am not trying to micromanage — just manage. Does my son's to-do list make him an overscheduled child — and me a hyper-parent? Maybe. But, I am convinced it does not make me a bad mother. We are busy, but we are happy. And that's what matters most.