

How much is too much?

By Steven G. Little and Angeleque Akin-Little

‘What do you want to do?’ ‘I don’t know, what do *you* want to do?’

When we were teenagers that is how we and our friends started most of our leisure time. With increasingly full schedules, many adolescents these days – especially gifted adolescents – never get the opportunity to do the same thing. Their schedules are so hectic that we have to ask, is leisure time a thing of the past?

Research suggests that with schools, parents and adolescents all having input into how adolescents spend their time, over-scheduling is becoming more and more common and a growing concern to many people. Some even believe that ‘busyness’ has become a status symbol. Meanwhile, many parents are complaining that they are so busy carpooling their children to various activities that their home life – what little there is of it – is completely disrupted.

A group of American parents self-named ‘Family Life 1st’, in the town of Wayzata, Minnesota, took on the challenge of reducing the ‘ever-tightening grip’ of extra-curricular activities. They spoke with instructors and group leaders, requesting that they decrease practice time and increase schedule flexibility so that children could eat meals with their families and participate in more family vacations. In Ridgefield, New Jersey, parents decided their families were not spending enough time together because of over-scheduling of their children. It took parents a year to schedule a night of setting aside all activities (e.g. homework, soccer, etc.) to spend one night with their families.

In general, adolescents respond well to structured activities and students who are not involved in meaningful activities after school may miss out on opportunities for self-improvement. However, many – including parents and child therapists – wonder how many structured activities is enough and how much is too much. Concerns have also been reported about the amount of time devoted each week to these activities, and about the pressure and expectations to succeed in each activity from parents, coaches and often children and adolescents themselves.

Physically, increasing obligations may cause changes in sleep patterns, as well as the amount of sleep obtained. A survey of adolescents in New England revealed that high school students who worked 20 hours or more per week reported later bedtimes, shorter sleep times, more-frequent episodes of falling asleep in school, and more-frequent oversleeping and arriving late for school than students working fewer than 20 hours per week. Many adolescents are getting less sleep despite the fact that they require 8½ to 9½ hours per night. Some of the consequences of reduced sleep are memory lapses, attention deficit, depressed mood, slowed reaction time and lower grades. In addition, there is evidence that reduced sleep can lead to the development or exacerbation of emotional and behavioural difficulties. To date, there are no studies suggesting that overscheduling can cause psychiatric disorders. However, the stress

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of being overscheduled may push those who are vulnerable to these problems over the edge.

Adolescent stress has been associated with several negative consequences, including delinquent conduct and classroom burnout. Depressive phenomena – including depressed mood, syndromes and disorders – are associated with adolescent stress. Extreme levels of stress may be a contributing factor to adolescent health problems, violence, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse. Like adults, adolescents are feeling the time crunch. But for them, time stress appears to be most related to the demands of adult-structured activities, as well as expectations from teachers about schoolwork and from parents about their contribution to household chores.

Shaw and colleagues surveyed and interviewed high school students on their time-use patterns. Students provided estimates of the amount of time spent on various activities, including schoolwork, paid work and household chores. Students also reported their attitudes toward time, work and leisure. The results indicated that a little over half of the students felt they did not have enough time to get everything done during school hours, while almost half reported not having enough time to get things done outside of school. Expectations from teachers about schoolwork and from parents about helping with household chores were the most frequently reported time stressors, with some gender differences – e.g. girls reporting feeling more pressure to engage in household chores than boys. For some students, employment and involvement in structured and organised activities also contributed to perceived time stress. Interviews with highly stressed students revealed that they felt they had little control over their daily activities, as they were often responding to the demands of adults or regularly scheduled activities.

Academic pressures are of specific significance for gifted high school students. Many adolescents in high school spend a great deal of time thinking about and preparing for university or other future plans. The increased focus on academics for high school students has not gone unnoticed. For example, admissions personnel from Harvard recently posted a paper on their admissions website called ‘Time out or burn out for the next generation’. It suggests that individuals need more unstructured leisure time in childhood and would benefit more from ‘old-fashioned summer jobs’ rather than educational vacations, which appear to be gaining in popularity.

Everyone’s social environment restricts their leisure behaviour to some degree, but for gifted adolescents there may be considerably



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more constraints. Adolescence is a time for establishing oneself as an individual, with expanding abilities that will make a person an integral part of society. It is a period in which adolescents face high expectations to be many things to different people in their lives, including parents, teachers and themselves. Consequently, social roles and obligations place constraints on leisure, and influence how adolescents spend their time.

Research indicates that adolescent involvement in meaningful after-school work and social activities increases opportunities for self-improvement. Through extra-curricular activities, adolescents possibly acquire interpersonal skills for dealing with others that are socially marketable and economically rewarded. Household tasks are often children’s first introduction to work, as well as a way to develop helping behaviour and explore the growth of independence. In the workplace, adolescents can develop autonomy as well as constructive work habits. However, researchers have found that highly stressed youth who participated in a greater number of activities, spent more hours on homework and fewer hours alone were more likely to show signs of impairment in stressful situations.

Data from a recent study we conducted indicated that over-scheduling can have a detrimental effect on a student’s anxiety levels. This data, collected from an affluent high school in suburban New York City, indicated that students are engaging in many

different activities and have little free time. This appeared to lead to increases in stress levels. Interestingly, however, those increased activity levels were also related to better grades. It behooves future researchers to ascertain the exact conditions under which anxiety, or even somatisation (i.e. increased health-related concerns such as stomach aches, etc.), may occur for students under high pressure. It is also of vital importance that these types of studies be conducted over a period of time (e.g. longitudinal studies) and with different populations. For example, data has not been collected on the effects this type of pressure may have on gifted students, nor on how students feel about parental pressure.

We have recently submitted a grant application in order to examine these and other variables as they may specifically relate to New Zealand adolescents. No NZ study to date has been conducted, with all research focused on US students. It is our hope to collect this data with the gifted population and share it with the wider community.

Now, ‘What do you want to do?’

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