



AFTER-SCHOOL OVERLOAD?

As parents book their children in for more and more after-school clubs, are we in danger of overscheduling them? RHIANE KIRKBY finds out

With the new school term about to start, for many parents it means juggling drop-offs, pick-ups and inset days, but also factoring in a weekly activity timetable. “In my day, there was only swimming, ballet, football, cubs and brownies,” reminisces one grandma. “Now it’s gone completely crazy.” Take a look at Annabel’s diary and you may be inclined to agree. Her children do a total of 13 different out-of-school activities each week. As a consequence they rarely eat their evening meal at home and usually do their homework in the car. And even though

YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE DENYING YOUR CHILD OPPORTUNITY IF YOU DON'T PLAY BALL

organising this weekly schedule appears to be a full time job, Annabel still finds the time to work as a lawyer and battle a long daily commute.

“I’m really not a tiger mum,” explains Annabel. “In fact, I’m not competitive at all. I rarely watch my kids doing any of their activities as I’m usually working on my laptop.” So, you may ask, why does she put herself through this gruelling schedule? “In the old days, kids would come home and go running around in the street – that just doesn’t happen anymore, but they still need to burn off energy. Most of the activities we do are physical and that’s my choice, but I never make them do anything they don’t enjoy.” When asked whether she feels her children are missing out on time with family and friends or the chance to unwind after school, Annabel is quick to defend.

“Childhood is about having fun and that’s what my kids are doing. They’re with their friends every night and we all sit down to family meals at the weekend. They go straight to sleep when they go to bed and I really believe they’re doing better academically because they’re burning up all that energy.”

Interestingly, a new study, which is thought to be the first of its kind, into the link between participation in after-school activities and academic attainment supports Annabel’s belief. The research by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at University College London concluded that primary school children who take part in clubs and organised sports achieve more academically and have better social, emotional and behavioural skills than those who don’t.

Annabel’s schedule may sound extreme, but she’s definitely not alone. Joanne’s two boys do eight different activities each week and she also volunteers to run one of their groups.

“I don’t feel pressured by others,” she says, “but I do put pressure on myself. I think every child should learn to swim, and they love the other things they do – they’d be devastated if I decided to stop them.”

Michelle, on the other hand, admits she does feel the need to conform. “Children should be allowed to play, be creative and run around the park, woods or playground, but

LOOKING TO SIGN UP?

CLUB PETIT PIERROT

Little ones have the chance to learn French through fun and games in these multi-sensory classes. Founded almost 25 years ago, sessions are run by French natives in various venues across the capital. clubpetitpierrot.co.uk

THE LITTLE LONDON MUSIC SCHOOL

A great opportunity to introduce your child to the joy of music. Classes are divided by age group, where kids can enjoy opera-quality music, learn about a variety of instruments, and sing and clap. thelittlelondonmusicschool.com

PLAYBALL

Watch as your kids learn the basics of sport, balance and coordination. There’s a wide variety of sporting activities to try; from tennis, football and cricket to baseball and volleyball. playballlondon.com

THE AVENUE COOKERY SCHOOL

Children can learn how to cook a variety of dishes at this cookery school in Wandsworth. Best of all, they can take home their creations at the end of each session to share with the family. theavenuecookeryschool.com

MINI ARTISTS AT DODO STUDIOS

Suitable for ages six and upwards, budding artists can flex their creative muscles at Dodo Studios in Dulwich. They’ll get to create their own masterpieces, while learning about different art movements and mediums. miniartists.co.uk

if everyone else has tennis lessons from the age of four, football from five, swimming at six and is a proficient ballet dancer at seven, you feel like you are denying your child an opportunity if you don’t play ball.”

Primary school teacher Laura points out that children need downtime too. “I think my two do the right amount of activities – two or three a week. I appreciate that’s on the low side, but I strongly believe that it’s important for your child to get bored. If they are constantly being ferried from one activity to the other then they will never stop and work out what they really want to do.”

That’s something author India Knight agrees with: “I spent hours being bored as a child, something I consider extremely character forming. But no, not any more. The generation we’ve raised are lost without the slew of extracurricular activities their loving parents have organised for them.”

So is it true to say that parents are actually fuelling this extracurricular craze? “Fear of missing out is rampant among parents,” says parenting coach Judy Reith. “We must be willing to make sacrifices to accommodate our children’s passions, and far better to be doing something healthy and stimulating than sitting at home with games consoles, but we really must try not to worry about what other families are doing.”

For teacher Laura, the guilt factor also comes into play. “In my experience parents who tend to do loads of activities are often those with one child. They’re guilty they don’t have a sibling to play with. Or they’re full time working parents who feel guilty about working crazy hours and want to use the money they earn to give their children the best start in life.”

That said, while experts agree that exhausting your children by pushing them into too many things or putting pressure on them to succeed where you may have failed can have serious consequences, few can argue the benefits of having the right balance of activities. And with only 21% of boys and 16% of girls aged five to 15 doing the recommended amount of daily exercise, after-school clubs are perhaps more important than ever before. **L**