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never underestimate the power of caring

Demanding Activities: When are they too much?

It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities. - J. K. Rowling, author

Whether your child is involved in sports, music, the arts, or another activity, there often comes a time when she finds herself involved in an activity that demands a great deal of time and money. In our "go-go-go" society, there are a growing number of activities that now require kids to give almost all of their free time to participate. How do you know when this is the right thing to do? Consider these ideas:

Tips for . . .

all parents

- Talk with your child about what's important and what he wants to do. Some kids want to do ballet, debate, volunteering, or a musical group that requires intensive training and activity. Other kids don't. Discuss these issues together.
- As a family, talk about your values regarding success. Kids do better academically and socially, and behave in ways we value, when they have multiple interests instead of just one. Talk about the value of pursuing a number of interests that your child gets excited about.
- If you want your child to be good at something, that pursuit will be demanding in terms of time. That's true for all people. In order to master a skill, it takes time and practice.
- Consider the pros and cons of kids doing demanding activities.
- Know what you're willing to invest financially in an activity. Talk to your child about this. It can be painful when she begins to enjoy and excel at an activity and you find that you're required to shell out hundreds—if not thousands—of dollars. Ask about the financial aspects of an activity; not only for this season or this year, but in the coming years as well.

Parents with children ages birth to 5

- Most child development experts recommend that young children avoid demanding activities. That's because young children are growing and developing rapidly, and demanding activities could hurt their development in other ways.
- Notice how your child reacts to scheduled activities. Does he get excited and stay engaged? Or does he whine and want to leave? The way your child acts will tell you a lot about what your child thinks of an activity.
At this age, children like to spend most of their time with their families. If your child is in child care or preschool, keep the time that she's not in those programs as family time.
- Kids at this age need downtime at home.

Parents with children ages 6 to 9

- Follow your child's interests. If you'd like your child to sign up for a sport, give your child options, but let him choose. He will be more likely stick with something if it's his idea.
- Keep an eye on your child's enthusiasm and energy. For some kids, getting used to kindergarten and then first grade is a big enough transition that adding activities to it doesn't quite work. Other kids may thrive on doing an activity they love in addition to school.
- Before you sign your child up for an activity, see if you can find out how demanding it is. Sometimes activity descriptions don't give the full picture.

Parents with children ages 10 to 15

- This is the age when kids can get placed on a demanding path, whether it's in sports, tutoring, art, or another activity. If that happens, ask a lot of questions up front so that you and your child know what you're getting into.
- Get to know the adults leading the programs that your children are in. Even if your child is in a demanding program, she will be more likely to stick with it if she enjoys the activity and has a good rapport with the adult leaders.
- Toward the end of this stage (typically between ages 13 and 15), your child may want to quit an activity that he or she used to enjoy because others are excelling in it more quickly than he is. Talk with him about doing activities that bring your child joy and pleasure. You don't need to be "the best" at an activity in order to enjoy it.
- Notice how the activity is affecting other aspects of your child's life, such as school, friendships, and family. If your child wants to be a first-class gymnast, but all the training is leading to falling grades, you might need to reconsider.

Parents with children ages 16 to 18

- Some teenagers put a lot of energy into certain activities, which can be helpful at this age, since they can master skills and become even more proficient.
- If your child wants to go to college or university, showing leadership and proficiency in activities can help.
- Connect your teenager with other teenagers interested in the same activity. Often a teenager who has done extensive training will often feel alone in school with classmates who can't relate. Finding others who are also working in this area can often be beneficial.
- Ask your teenager helpful questions about his demanding activity, such as: What do you enjoy most about your activity? What stresses you out? How do you feel like you're being pushed? How can we best support you?