

**Help! I’m a Parent Run Ragged!**

by Joyce K. Ellis

Frenzy! A parent’s plague!

On her way home from carting her kids to four different activities one afternoon, a New Jersey woman grabbed some fast food before heading back onto the road. Suddenly a minivan whizzed past. Through the back window of the van, she saw a young girl changing from ballet clothes into a soccer uniform, shin guards, and cleats. A wake-up call to what author David Elkind calls “achievement overload.”

Over the years my husband and I have dashed to track meets, football games, band concerts, color guard competitions, choir concerts, drama performances, and more.

Loving, concerned parents want their kids to be well-rounded, to have every advantage in a competitive world. Extracurricular activities build self-esteem, lasting relationships, discipline, and responsibility. Some kids are gifted in the arts, athletics, academics. Some will even find their vocation in these pursuits.

Mindy1, a Minnesota girl, dabbled in piano and ice skating before gravitating to gymnastics. That, along with her brother’s hockey commitments, kept her parents scurrying. It took its toll. “All of a sudden you’re in a whirlpool, drowning in activities,” says her mother, Carla. “Your own personal time is absolutely sucked up.”

In the long run it can pay off. Darcy never made the Olympics, but she became a high school teacher and gymnastics coach, also running summer camps for children. “But there are no guarantees,” Debbie admits. Their hockey player son dropped out of sports and school with few ambitions.

In our efforts to help our children become future Renaissance men and women, how do we find balance? How do we give them opportunities without overstressing them and vacuuming all the energy out of our lives?

**Who fired the starting pistol?**

Somehow, in a generation or two we seem to have gone from “Children should be seen and not heard” to “There is nothing I will not sacrifice to make sure my children can have and do everything they want.”

Some parents take second jobs to pay for lessons, equipment, and practice sessions. Scampering from activity to activity may sacrifice nutrition, relaxation, and meals together, offering parents little time to actually get to know their children—and vice versa.

**What can drive this frenetic pace?**

* *Shooting for the big time*, sometimes parents pressure their kids to excel to ensure college scholarships, maybe even a multimillion-dollar pro contract. As far back as 1997, an article in *Money* magazine reported that “many parents are spending well over $10,000 a child a year to produce today’s super kids, often with money that might be more wisely invested in, say, a college savings fund.”2

But even the hottest stars can fizzle. One scholarship recipient with impressive musical, student government, and academic achievements slumped into deep depression during college. He says he never learned to be happy unless he could be the very best at everything.

* *Fear of saying no*. Perhaps we felt deprived of opportunities in our childhood. Perhaps we fear that saying no will lessen our children’s love and respect. But by setting boundaries, we model for our children a talent they will need later in life: the ability to let the good pass by in order to find their personal best.
* *Keeping them busy so we don’t have to worry about them*. Most kids today do not have to chop wood or milk cows to keep the family farm running. Tennis, drama, or karate are better than excessive screen time at keeping young people out of trouble. But activity alone will not ensure their well-being. Besides, scheduling every second of their lives deprives them of opportunities to play and discover for themselves.
* *Vicarious pleasure in our kids’ accomplishments*. Do we look to our children’s popularity and achievements for our sense of well-being? We may push them to excel, seeking to earn bragging rights. It is subtle. It creeps up on us. But it happens.
* *Genuinely wanting to encourage our children’s talents and interests.* This is a great motive, but beware the fine line between encouragement and pushing. And consider the well-being of the entire family, as well as that of each child.

Dahlia remembers when she and her daughters watched an American ice skater win Olympic gold. Both girls, ages 9 and 6, already showed skating prowess and other talents. With their brother’s computer aptitude and vocal talent all three children harbored tremendous potential.

But Dahlia and her husband determined that it was not worth the expense and frenetic pace to produce trophy kids. “Realistically,” she said, “for just one of my children truly to reach fullest flower means that another would barely bud, much less bloom.”

Being No. 1 may not be as valuable as being good—and unfrazzled.

A piece of biblical wisdom essentially says, “What good is it if you win all the gold medals in the world and lose your heart and soul?”3

**The best way to love our kids**

How can we be the great parents we want to be and provide stable, not frenzied, families?

* **Set limits.** Sometimes activities set their own limits because of overlapping schedules. But when they do not, discuss with your children what you can afford–both financially and time-wise—and stick to your guns.
* **Major in networking**. Do your homework about an activity before enrolling your kids. Talk with other parents whose children are currently involved. Find out how they handle schedules, finances, and other demands.
* **Master your calendar.** One family uses a desk-blotter-sized calendar on the kitchen wall. Each family member records his or her activities in a different colored marker. The color coding provides a quick overview of who might be spreading themselves too thin. Some phone scheduling apps, such as Family Wall, feature color coding that accomplish the same. But a large wall backup system makes a bigger impression.

Another couple keeps a breakfast date each Saturday morning with phones or other calendars in hand. Not only does this give them a chance to decide who drives which kids to what activities; it also provides time for themselves to make sure the marriage doesn’t crumble under the weight of competing schedules. Single parents often benefit from carpool buddies or grandparents’ help.

* **Guard personal time.** As long as you’re scheduling activities, write in regular personal time, whether it’s window shopping, workout time, or an uninterrupted hour with a good book. Hurry shrinks everyone’s fuse.
* **Become an efficiency seeker.** Look for ways to do two or more things at once. When my kids were running track, I was a back-to-school mom. So I studied in the bleachers between my kids’ races. Remember point number 4, however! Not every second in your day can be filled with five activities.
* **Make time count while chauffeuring your kids.** “Shuttle time” is a good opportunity to catch up on our children’s lives, remind them of our love, and build them up.
* **Seek help when you need it.** Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It’s good personal management. Counselors, support groups, and other parents can provide perspective. And there is someone who knows better than we do what we can handle—our Creator. He offers guidance to all who give him His rightful place in their lives.

Scripture promises that “the Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame” (Isaiah 58:11 niv). I believe we can substitute the phrase *frenzied* for *sun-scorched* as well.

* **Above all,** **remember that no two children and no two families are alike.** Some parents juggle tutoring sessions, soccer practices, music lessons, art classes—and more—with grace and laughter. Others function better with fewer demands.

After all, not everyone can change clothes in the back of a moving vehicle—or run their lives from sunup to sundown—without crashing.

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