

Your Exercise Prescription: Do less to be healthier

Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, PhD, E-RYT, CYT

Your overscheduled, over planned schedule full of activities may be a hazard to your health. Streamline your calendar and make time to do nothing and just play.



If you are a working mom with children of a certain age, you likely spend a fair amount of your time in a car, playing chauffeur as you shuttle your children between activities. Research indicates that a small percentage of children (about 6%) do more than 20 hours of extracurricular activities per week. A much larger group, though, of children have four to five hours per week of after school activities – between 40 and 50 percent of children have four to five activities of extracurricular activities per week.

You probably spend the time in the driver's seat to support your child/children, and because you want what is best for them. You are doing what you think is best – because the conventional wisdom says all those activities are important – they teach your child valuable skills, prepare them for college applications, and are supposed to help make them healthier.

According to the World Health Organization, adults should get at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week. The WHO recommends that children and young adults ages 11 to 17 should do, at a minimum, one hour of moderate to vigorous activity per day. And yet, more than 30% of American adults fail to meet the very minimal recommendations of the WHO (walking for 30 minutes, five days a week). More than 70% of 11 to 17 year olds in the US fail to meet minimum guidelines for physical activity per day.

So if you're driving your kid to dance and gymnastics classes – ballet on Mondays, tap on Tuesday, tumbling/gymnastics on Wednesday, hip-hop on Thursdays, and modern dance on Fridays – you probably breathed a sigh of relief. You're making sure your daughter meets the minimum fitness requirements and the time in the car is worth it. Right? Maybe not.

According to research from James Sallis, PhD, at the University of California, San Diego, dance teachers spend a quarter of class time providing verbal instruction and demonstration, and another quarter of the class time on breaks and stretching. So in an hour dance class, your child may only do 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity. Most schools rotate resource and enrichment classes such as PE, music, and art, which means in many schools, children take PE only once or twice per week. Recess may have been cut or reduced in time, depending on state standards and district emphasis on test preparation. If

your child doesn't have recess or PE, and you don't have time to go to the park as you rush across town between school, classes, and home, then that 30 minutes of exercise in dance class is the only 30 minutes your kid gets.

And you probably didn't get any exercise, either, as you rushed between school drop-off, work, errands on your lunch hour, school pick-up, after school activities, then home for the dinner-homework-bathtime-bedtime-next-day-preparation to do it all again rush. It's chaotic and stressful. In fact, 48% of working moms say that they frequently or occasionally have trouble managing their work and personal life, according to the most recent [Working Mother Research Institute survey](#). Only 47% of moms are satisfied with the amount of time they have for self-care.

It's true that activities are important for children. Renowned speaker and autism [expert Dr. Temple Grandin](#) has said that cultural and artistic skills like music, art, and crafts are vital for helping children learn skills that may prepare them for skills. Likewise, research continues to indicate that participating in a variety of activities exposes children to different people and different ways of learning and communicating. But, we should remember that just as much as we need to schedule important and engaging activities, we also need to schedule downtime. Children need time at the playground to just run in circles and climb. Children need time to stare at the clouds and daydream. Children need time when adults are not telling them what to do, so that they can figure out how to manage for themselves. That doesn't mean more time at home, on the couch, watching a screen – but rather more time outside, without any rules, schedules, or formal agenda – just time to play, relax, and breathe the fresh air.

Unscheduled time is good for moms, too – because moms can get the same benefits of activity and fresh air from playing tag at the park, and the same benefits of relaxation from staring at the clouds and doing nothing. That unscheduled time also means one less leg of a trip in the car for you and your kids, and a lower risk that you're going to get tired and drive through a fast food restaurant in desperation when everyone gets cranky with hunger.

Keep the activities your kids love or the ones you find vital. Maybe you consider piano lessons non-negotiable and your daughter loves her swim lessons. But maybe another class is something you are both luke-warm about. If so, drop it, and pencil in “playground for mom and kids” for Tuesday afternoon instead.

Consider this your formal exercise prescription: do less. It's good for your health.

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Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, PhD, is #TheFitEnoughMom. Dr. Bonura is an exercise scientist, an Experienced-Registered Yoga Teacher with the Yoga Alliance, a certified personal trainer, and a certified group fitness instructor, and a working mom of two. Her mission is to help everyone realize that fitness can be fun and accessible – no stress, no guilt, and definitely no pain!