

## Too Much of a Good Thing?

“My life is so crazy – All I do is drive kids around from activity to activity. This is so crazy – we never have any time!!” Sound familiar? In talking with parents around Arlington, I often hear concerns expressed about the hectic schedules they all keep. For a variety of reasons, there are other families who have a very hard time getting their kids to any activities around the County, but right now let’s focus on the former. Parents talk about how over-scheduled they are, but at the same time, they don’t see any way to slow down their frantic life style. What’s going on here?

For children in elementary school, “self efficacy” is their task. They *want* to learn new things and feel competent. And as parents, we want them to have lots of different experiences to encourage their sense of competency and their excitement about learning. After-school activities are valuable experiences that help children learn specific skills and also help them learn how to get along with other children and adults in a variety of situations. But when do all these activities become too much of a good thing? When does the time spent in activities start to impact the time we need for other valuable things like time together as families, and even some other very basic things like sleeping!

I don’t think there’s an easy answer to this question, but I do think it’s a question parents need to ponder. After all, like it or not, parents are the ones in charge of creating a family environment that supports and empowers children and supports and empowers adults too. It’s up to parents to reflect on their family environment and then make the changes they think are necessary. We all get the same 24 hours and we don’t have much control over that, but we do have control over how we use those 24 hours. If you and your children are spending much of the afternoon, evening and weekend hours with activities, what other areas of your lives aren’t getting the time they need?

Developing a sense of belonging and connectedness within a family does not happen by chance. *It really does take time to develop and sustain family relationships* and we have to be intentional about making this a priority and ensuring that there is time built into our day to nurture our family life. There is lots of room for creative thinking here, but here are some questions you might want to ask yourselves.

- **How often do you all sit down and have a meal together?** From our Assets survey, we know that 15% of Arlington teens **never** eat dinner with their families. The food itself is not the central issue, but making a time to be together without the TV is essential. This is not a time to do family business but rather a time to have a conversation.
- **When did you last have a conversation with your family?** You remember conversations - those are the things that might start off with “Remember when we . . .” or “I was reading about . . .,” or “On the news they said . . .” Those are conversations. “What did you learn in school today?” is usually a conversation stopper!
- **How often do you say; “Hurry-up! We have to go!”** Most of us adults are not happy with our frantic life styles yet we seem to be modeling this life style on a daily basis for our children. Is this really what we want for them?

- **How much time does your child have to think and day dream and play?** Children need to have time to just “be” and in our fast-paced culture that will not happen unless you make it happen. It’s essential for their positive development that they have time that is not structured or adult-directed.
- **What are your family rituals?** Holidays and birthdays, bedtime and meal times, snow days and summer days provide us with an opportunity to take routine and make it ritual. Rituals take ordinary everyday routines and enrich them with love. It doesn’t have to be a big deal or expensive. When we remember our own childhoods, it’s often these rituals that make us smile.
- **How many hours of sleep is your child getting?** Tired children have a hard time coping and as we all know, it’s very hard to learn and grow when you’re exhausted. Most elementary age children need 9-11 hours of sleep a night!

Trying to balance your own competing needs is a difficult task, and it’s that much more difficult to balance all the competing needs of the individuals that live in your house and call themselves family. But taking the time to think about your family priorities is worth the effort. Twenty years from now, your children will probably have forgotten about many of their activities but they always carry with them their sense of belonging to family.