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Kids may feel stressed out from multiple activities

BYLINE: Amy Brenner-Fricke; TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

At the age of 9, Ryan Lang was utterly exhausted.

After a full day of school, the Northboro third-grader would rush to one or more of his many extracurricular activities.

Cub Scout meetings took up several afternoons each month, as did Spanish classes, violin and piano lessons and basketball practices. And of course, there was homework to finish every day.

Finally, he couldn't handle it anymore.

"He was always in a terrible mood," said Bonnie Lang, Ryan's mother. "He started hating everything he did, and he was so irritable. It was a major issue to even get him to do his schoolwork."

With the arrival of September and the back-to-school rush on, many families find their calendars begin to fill up quickly with after-school and extracurricular activities such as gymnastics classes, soccer games and music lessons. Many parents find themselves spending an ever-increasing amount of time in the car shepherding their kids from place to place.

However, they may also find themselves cranky and on edge, trying to remember the last time the entire family ate dinner together in one place.

Years ago, the phrase "organized play" was something of an oxymoron. During

most of the 20th century, children's activities were characterized by play that was "spontaneous, unstructured and without adult involvement," according to a 2001 paper published by the Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

It was in the latter part of the century that "free play" gave way to organized sports and other extracurricular activities.

The statistics show the trend. In 1981 the U.S. Youth Soccer Association had 810,800 registered players; today, the figure tops 2.9 million.

Today, the lazy days adults may remember from their own childhoods- when every afternoon kids could roam the neighborhood on a bike, climb a tree or gather for a pick-up game of kickball- are gone.

According to a University of Michigan study reported in the May 1999 issue of American Demographics, children today have more than 75 percent of their weekday time programmed.

"Family life is busier these days," said Lisa Kamean-Silva, a child psychologist in Shrewsbury. "We live in a society that's changed. Parents worry about the population around them, and they keep their children engaged in activities run by adults they can trust."

"There are a lot more working parents," added Sharon Campion, a pediatrician in Central Massachusetts. "Kids today don't have the capability to just hang. And if they do, they often find that their friends are off doing other things anyway. Or if you don't live in a neighborhood that has other kids, you feel you have to schedule something for your kids to do."

Most parents view extracurricular activities as opportunities to cultivate a child's interests or innate talents, or expose them to new things. Those were

the motivating factors for Mrs. Lang when she registered Ryan for various and multiple activities.

"I thought he would like each one of the things he signed up for," she said. "We really pushed him to take the music lessons because he's good at it, so we encouraged him to take a class that was really challenging. We pushed him so hard that now he doesn't want to play music at all anymore, even though he once enjoyed it.

"And then, as a parent, once you sign them up, you feel like they have to finish- partly because you paid for it, and partly because you want to make them stick it out. If you let them try something and they quit right away, they won't have the discipline to get through the rough parts and get better at it," she said.

Another worry, said Mrs. Lang, is the amount of exercise children receive today.

"Obesity is such a problem with kids, and I worry about him gaining weight," she said. "The real problem is that they don't get enough exercise in school, so you feel like you have to push them to get it at home."

The question is: Are our children becoming overstressed by the increased demands on their time? After all, stress is a part of life for everyone.

According to various studies, some stress is good for us- it keeps our bodies and minds alert and can even boost performance levels.

However, too much stress can be overwhelming and that's especially true for children, who lack the life experience and strategies for coping that adults have when they feel stressed out, according to Ms. Kamean-Silva.

"Some kids react to the 'busyness' of everyday life and do very well, while

some do not," she said.

Ms. Kamean-Silva said there are several signs that a child may be overstressed. If your child exhibits any of the following behaviors on an ongoing basis, you may want to re-examine his or her after-school schedule.

Acting grouchy, mooney, tearful or irritable.

Falling grades or refusal to do homework.

Frequent unexplained stomachaches, headaches or fatigue.

Exceptional sluggishness or restlessness.

Excessive worrying.

Concentration problems.

Changes in appetite.

Unprovoked hostility or aggression.

Significant weight loss or gain.

Little interest in playing with others.

While some children can become overstressed by too many after-school activities, it's important to remember that participation, in some of them, is beneficial.

According to a recent study by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, children who participate in after-school programs are more engaged in and have a better attitude about learning, perform better academically, and enjoy an increased sense of accomplishment, competence and self-esteem.

Ms. Kamean-Silva said it often best if a child is registered for no more than two activities at one time.

"For example, your child can sign up for music lessons and one sport each season," she said. "Beyond that, you really start to overload the child.

Remember, each of these activities require practice as well, so it's never just once a week. And when both parents are working and there are several children in the family, all with their own agendas, it stresses the whole family."

It's really all a matter of finding the right balance between being involved and being over-involved, said Dr. Campion.

"We recommend keeping kids involved as much as they can handle, but also advocate family time," she said. "Plan family meals or things like family movie nights. Kids often feel like life is out of control and they need a constant that they can look forward to."

Now that he's entering Grade 5, Ryan Lang finds himself with more free time on his hands. His parents didn't sign him up for any activities at all last year, giving him the opportunity to relax and hang out with his friends.

"He loved doing nothing," said Mrs. Lang. "It was hard because I felt like I should make him choose something to do, but he found that he enjoys the downtime.

"And this year he decided on his own that he wants to try skiing. He has the time now to be able to explore the things he wants to do. And he's much happier that way."