

Too Busy for Family Time?

Did you know that over the past 20 years, children's free time for play and unstructured activities has declined by 12 hours per week? During that same period, time in structured sports has doubled, and passive, spectator leisure has increased 5 times, to over three hours per week. The impact this has had on families is profound: a 100% decrease in household conversations, a 33% decrease in family dinners, and a 28% decrease in families taking vacations.

What difference does this make for the children? A national poll of teens found that 21% rated "Not having enough time together with parents" as their top concern. Another study found that teens that ate meals regularly with their families had greater academic success, participated in fewer undesirable behaviors and were better adjusted psychologically. Children were also found to eat more healthy foods if they ate regular meals with their families.

How about your family? How many hours a week are your children involved in structured sports, dance, music and other activities? Do they have much time left to just play? How many hours per week is your family involved as spectators? How many hours are spent in practice times? In travel to and from activities? What are your costs for equipment, clothes, meals eaten out, and fuel?

By contrast, how much time does your family have for just "hanging out" together? Do you eat family meals together on a regular basis? When was your last family vacation? Are you planning one this year?

If your family mirrors the typical family, it may be time to actually chart out where your free time and money are going. Keep track of the practice time, game, spectator and travel time for each person. Add up the money spent for each activity. Talk about why you are participating in each activity. What things has your family given up by being involved in these activities? Is this really how you want to spend your family time?

It may be that you choose not to make any changes. But you may find, once you actually see the time and money invested, that you will decide that cutting back would be best for your family. It could clear the way for more family meals, more conversation, and maybe even a family vacation!

Written by Jeanette Friesen, Extension Educator
Reviewed by UNL Extension Educators and Specialists

Source: Overscheduled Kids, Underconnected Families: The Research Evidence, Dr. William Doherty.