

LIFESTYLE

Top tips to avoid 'family fatigue'

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Rather than ferrying kids to music lessons, sports games and playgroups, it seems we should be saving our energy and sending the kids out into the backyard. Photo / Thinkstock

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By: Caroline Berdon

Children need time and space just to play and to be - if not they'll end up psychologically damaged and useless, says a British parenting writer and philosopher.

Tom Hodgkinson is author of *The Idle Parent*, a book that encourages parents to adopt a hands-off approach so that their children become more self-reliant and capable.

Such advice could be something parents in this part of the world need to hear. A new survey of more than 400 Australian parents with kids between the ages of five and 12 shows almost half (47 per cent) are suffering from "family fatigue". And the culprits? A lack of time, too many extracurricular activities, too much homework and too many hours spent in front of a television or computer screen.

Experts and parents alike seem to agree that kids need unstructured play in order to harness their creativity, imagination and sense of self, yet the Let's Play survey found that in 46 per cent of families, the children had no more than one or two hours of free time per day.

And the less free time parents allocate to their children, the more anxious parents seem to become.

Rather than ferrying kids to music lessons, sports games and playgroups, it seems we should be saving our energy and staying at home, dragging out the dress-up or craft box, or sending the kids out into the backyard.

"When I researched *The Idle Parent*, it was fairly obvious to me that [stress through overscheduling] was what was happening all over the world - not just in the Anglo countries but also in South and Central America and Asia," says Hodgkinson, who lives in North Devon in England's West Country with his wife and three children - Arthur, 11, Delilah Rose, nine, and Henry, six.

He blames the issue on globalisation.

"All the activities cost money so you're encouraged to fill up your time and pay for these activities and that contributes to the growth of the economy ... it starts with the baby, when we're encouraged to buy these hugely expensive strollers. From the moment it's born, the baby is a sort of commodity."

Alex Brooks, editor of Australian parenting website *Kidspot*, which ran the survey, agrees there is an obsession with having more.

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"We all think we can be better parents by doing more ... by enriching the child in some way - it might be a music or dance lesson or a sports activity, but it's not necessarily to the benefit of the whole family.

"I think we often forget to think of the benefits of doing nothing for the kids."

Brooks, who lives in Sydney's inner west with her two sons - Louis, 10, and Hugo, eight - admits that the hectic life of having two children stresses her out, but says she maintains control by only allowing her children one activity per term.

"They have music lessons and band; in summer they did little athletics.

"Limiting kids' activities to one or two things a week is great, if you can do it without bearing all the mother guilt!"

Brooks says every family needs to find their own version of downtime. It might be staying home and shutting the doors, going to the park or going to watch a sports game together, or cooking and eating a family meal.

"Kids eating together at the table is probably just as beneficial as going to a dance lesson. It's just as important for their development."

Hodgkinson believes overscheduling and encouraging kids into activities chosen by the parents "backfires anyway".

"I do believe in some level of fate. You try and do all these things but your children go their own way in the end."

With his own children, extracurricular activities are Latin and Greek lessons given by himself at home, and surfing after school as a family if the weather's nice.

Hodgkinson says he has tried to keep a favourite quote by revered English novelist DH Lawrence in mind when raising his children, which is "leave the kids alone".

"This means leave the child alone and they will become more self-reliant and more capable; do lots of things for them, ferry them around and put them in little outfits, then they get used to being mummied," he says, "and become fairly useless."

"While it's great to learn sports, overscheduling can be psychologically damaging to children because the child doesn't develop its own capabilities.

"It's also silly because it's expensive," he adds.

"My whole idea is to cut down your outgoings, be thrifty, so you don't have to have a full-time job - and can spend more time with your family."

To encourage your children to amuse themselves, Hodgkinson recommends gathering kids in numbers by inviting friends' children round to play or going camping with other families.

But Hodgkinson admits his own mission to encourage his children to play by themselves has not always been easy.

"It's easy to just let the children watch television or play computer games and not have a big fight by turning it off, physically pushing them outside the front door while they're

screaming and whining - it's difficult.

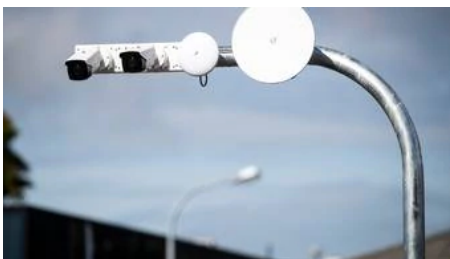
"But it has worked, and 20 minutes later they're all outside playing a fantastic game."

TIPS TO FREE UP THE FAMILY

1. Eat together as a family in the evening. It promotes easy conversation about everyone's day.
2. Limit your child's activities to one or two per week - or whatever gives you the right balance as a family.
3. Check in with yourself to assess if your routine is making you stressed, and to make sure you have enough time to give your children unstructured play.
4. Get creative. Leave a box of random household items in your child's room and change the objects regularly, or leave random objects (an old hockey stick, a tennis racket or a ball) in the garden, or kitchen utensils in the sandpit.
5. Turn off the TV or computer and send the kids outside instead.
6. Don't apply the same rules for all kids - they're often very different.
7. If you let your children do an activity, let them choose what they want to do.
8. Don't be afraid of saying no to your child to one activity, or telling them they need to compromise.
9. Prioritise sleep (especially if you have younger children). All families are happier if the parents are feeling good.
10. Go camping. There'll be no distractions and plenty of time, space and inspiration for some good child's play.

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