

# finding balance

Homework, sports, chores—when do kids get to be kids? Here's some good advice for figuring out what's best for your family.

In her practice in Madison, Tennessee, therapist Julie Barnes has seen kids with heavier workweeks than their parents. Her advice: "Consider essentials first, then layer in the rest. Schoolwork, family time and sleep are always the top three priorities."

## homework

"Make sure the workload isn't overwhelming," says Barnes, "because then they're no longer learning."

How to help? Suzannah Kolbeck of Marietta, Georgia, set up a quiet, well-stocked study space for her daughter. Timing is crucial, too, says Silvia Menendez of Gainesville, Florida. "Homework needs to happen first," she says.

True, says Barnes, "but a quick break, even just 15 minutes, can be a healthy breather."

**Bottom line:** Workloads vary, but a healthy average, says Barnes, is around **10 minutes of homework per grade** (third-graders have 30 minutes, sixth-graders have 60). Watch for emotional overload; if your child is consistently angry or teary about homework, talk with the teacher.

## extracurriculars household chores

Soccer? Orchestra? Barnes reminds you to make sure it's the child's ambition.

Says Menendez: "My girls used to take dance, but the expectation was to commit to ballet at age 8. They just wanted to have fun!" Kolbeck's 11-year-old, however, invests significant time in travel softball. "She took the lead," Kolbeck says. "It was her choice."

**Bottom line:** For most kids, says Barnes, **two after-school commitments a week are plenty**. If your child has lots of interests, try switching activities seasonally rather than piling them on all at once.

Most households expect kids to pitch in, and Barnes thinks that's great: "Kids learn responsibility and how to manage time." Still, Menendez admits chores tend to slide. "My kids walk the dogs," she says, "but when they're at school late, I don't make the dogs suffer!"

**Bottom line:** Even small jobs send a message: Kids are contributing family members. It doesn't have to be much, Barnes says. For most families, **15 to 30 minutes a day is a healthy average**.

## screen time

TV, computers, phones: They're everywhere. "Using a computer for research is OK," Barnes says, "but in general, put a cap on screen time."

**Bottom line:** TV and video games belong at the bottom of your child's to-do list. A good limit for most households is **one hour of screen time a day, tops**—after homework, says Barnes. "Creating a window of time to use the screen time is helpful, such as after dinner but before bedtime."

## family time

"Kids start pulling away from family as they get older," Barnes says. "It's natural." But studies indicate that kids who regularly have dinner with their parents are less likely to drink and smoke, and more likely to get good grades.

**Bottom line:** Build closeness into your schedule. **"Shoot for at least 15 minutes a day, per child,** doing something you both enjoy," Barnes says. And put family dinner nights on the calendar, just as you would any crucial appointment.

## downtime

"When children have time to themselves, to do their own thing," says Barnes, "it teaches them to manage their time and encourages creativity."

It's good for everyone, Menendez points out. "I want my girls to be able to entertain themselves."

**Bottom line:** **"The more activities a child takes in,"** says Barnes, **"the more downtime needed to recharge."** Your daughter spent two hours on homework and chores? Help her carve out two more hours to just be a kid. She's earned it. •

**Got Sleep?** The 2003 National Survey of Children's Health found that 15 million kids get inadequate sleep. Even a single-hour deficit leaves sixth-graders performing like fourth-graders on cognitive tests, so an early lights-out may be your child's best form of time management.