

Relatively speaking

AFTER SCHOOL OVERLOAD

How many activities are too many activities?

W“I’ve heard that gymnastics stands to them for life,” my friend said, unwittingly furthering my dilemma. I had just decided to take my kids out of gym and sign up for tennis instead. Maybe we could do both? If we could fit them in with swimming, hockey and GAA?

Like thousands of parents at this time of year, I’m eyeing up after-school activity lists, adding up costs and juggling schedules. In a world that’s filled with childhood obesity statistics, it’s all for their own good. Or is it? Is there a risk of activity-overload? How much is too much?

The upsides of activities are clear. Sport is great for overall physical health. Team sports encourage kids to work together. Music, art, and drama nurture talent. There’s a social element and of course huge enjoyment. And let’s be honest, many of us wonder – if only for a moment – could my child be the next Sonia O’Sullivan or Serena Williams?

But in fact, there are drawbacks to doing too many activities.

“Children need downtime,” says clinical psychotherapist Joanna Fortune, director of Solamh Parent Child Relationship Clinic.

“Time and opportunity for free play and unstructured activity in their day. There is a risk to having your child enrolled in multiple activities each day – they may become overwrought and exhausted.

“Children need the opportunity to experience boredom, because out of boredom they’ll develop a desire, they will learn what their passions are, what they like to do, and what they are good at.”

Stella O’Malley, author of *Cotton Wool Kids*, agrees. “Doing too many activities creates stressed and frustrated children. They have little opportunity to get in touch with themselves; to figure out what they like to do and who they like to play with. Children, just like adults, need time to process the day so that they can more deeply understand what exactly happened – whether that child was unkind or whether the teacher was being fair.”

So is there a rule of thumb, when choosing activities?

“Parents should reflect on whose desire they

are following,” says Fortune.

“If your child has an interest in a particular sport or hobby, then yes, they should participate in extra curricular activities in this area; yes it’s good for children to try new things so that they can experience what gives them pleasure. But this is key: they must be allowed to choose what they participate in.”

Even at that, as most parents know, kids often ask to do a huge number of activities. They’re too young to realize how exhausting it might be, so parents are faced with the unwelcome task of saying “no” to very worthy requests.

This is particularly difficult when a child wants to try a new sport. Parents are bombarded with statistics about childhood obesity, and the proliferation of sedentary, device-based activities, so surely anything that gets them off the couch should be welcomed?

Indeed, a 2010 report published by Dublin City University and the Irish Sports Council found that only 19 per cent of primary school children were meeting the recommended sixty minutes per day physical activity. The researchers advocated a significant increase in children’s participation levels in sport and physical exercise.

When findings like this are coupled with a pleading, upturned face begging to try hockey; it can be very hard for parents to say no.

But of course, it may not be necessary to say no. Every child is different, and each situation should be weighed up independently. There are no universal rules, but there are certainly some

signals that a child may be doing too much.

“Signs include irritability, exhaustion, difficulty fully engaging in the activity, saying they don’t want to do it, tearfulness – resistance in general,” says Fortune.

“The aim is to keep children at an optimal level of arousal, not too much, not too little, but just right, and this is not always easy to achieve.”

And for parents who are worrying about doing too many structured classes on the one hand, and too little physical activity on the other, there are of course alternatives.

“Throw them outside!” says O’Malley. “The best gift a parent can give is to teach their children to entertain themselves. They will moan initially, but keep the faith and maintain some firm rules – like ‘You’re not allowed cross the dangerous road.’

“They might not be used to playing outside alone, but eventually they will discover their natural inner resources and begin to have fun. Many parents believe that exercise within a structured activity is more effective, but research shows that free unstructured play in the fresh air expends significantly more energy than supervised and structured activities.”

So perhaps this term we’ll drop gymnastics, hold off on tennis, and try some more outdoor play instead. Suddenly that activity schedule doesn’t seem so daunting after all. And if there’s a budding Serena Williams in our midst, I’ll take my chances on spotting her out on the green. **WW**

