

Don't Let Kids' Sports Stretch You Too Thin

TODAY'S HARRIED SPORTS PARENTS

BY RICK WOLFF

play chauffeur, chef and schedule-keeper for their children. If it's Tuesday, the kids are scarfing sandwiches on their way from soccer practice to a baseball game, as Mom reminds them to change uniforms. Each day brings a fresh slate of after-school activities, not to mention weekends packed with games. And homework must figure in the mix too. Is this nonstop routine healthy for our kids? Or are we doing them—and our family structure—a disservice with all this shuttling around?

A long-term study by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research found that the time kids spent playing structured sports increased by 25% from 1981 to '97. They eat fewer dinners with their families and take fewer family vacations. Perhaps most significant, our children join in fewer family conversations each week.

This erosion perplexes any sports parent straining to keep up with his or her kids and also keep a family healthy. The challenges only multiply when you have more than one child. Yet despite this hectic reality, your athlete can enjoy the best of all worlds—and you can maintain your sanity—if you and your community take these proactive steps:

1. Check with your recreation and parks department to see if a master calendar of events exists. If not, help create one. Many local organizations will try to limit each sport's practices and games, as well as coordinate between sports, to reduce scheduling overlap. That way kids (and parents) don't have to sprint to the next event.

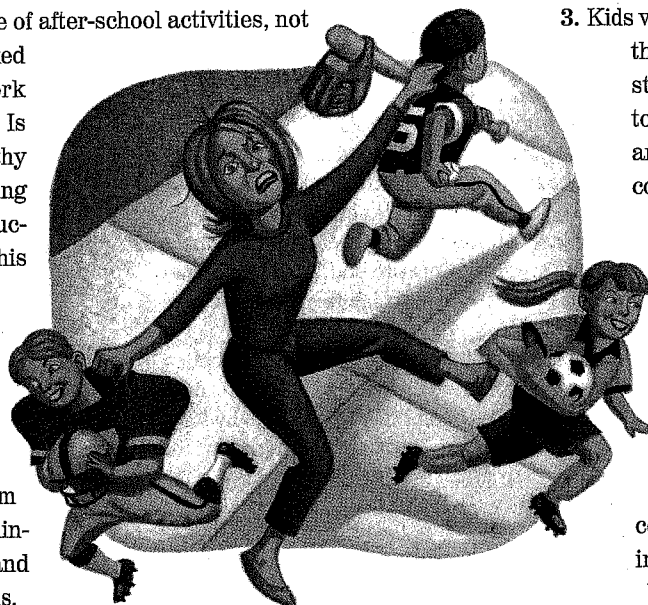
2. Though carpooling requires some planning, local organizations recommend it to reduce the strain on parents. Talk to your rec directors about setting up a schedule. At the first practice, survey parents to see who'd be willing to participate.

3. Kids who learn to budget time when they're young become better students. But it's up to you to help teach them how to balance homework with sports commitments. Also enlist your children's coaches to help spread the message: Schoolwork should be a priority.

4. What about those treks to away games? Make the most of them. In my experience, road trips give you valuable time to get to know your children. Start a conversation by complimenting their recent play. You'll be amazed how chatty your kids become when talking about their sports.

While no easy solutions exist for juggling young athletes' schedules, take heart

that organized sports offer your children a wonderful thrill. They'll grow in ways they never could sitting in front of a computer or TV all afternoon. That doesn't make your routine any easier, but it does make it worthwhile.



Take these proactive steps to help you and your athletes manage today's hectic schedules.

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SI Good Sports, in partnership with the National Recreation and Park Association, provides advice, action plans, resources and recognition for administrators, coaches and parents committed to excellence in youth sports. For more, and to learn how your town can join the Good Sports team, visit sigoodsports.com.



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