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Helping your children navigate activities of interest

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Listen to your children to know what they want to be involved with, help them comfortably try new activities and know how much they can handle. Credit: University of Alabama at Birmingham

In today's world, children are very active, being pushed and pulled into

various extracurricular activities. Parents sometimes struggle with listening to their children to determine their likes, dislikes, wants and needs, while helping navigate their children through a well-rounded childhood.

"Children, like adults, have different personalities; some are energetic and like to be on-the-go, and others are more comfortable at home," said Heather Austin, Ph.D., assistant professor in the University of Alabama at Birmingham Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. "Sometimes parents make executive decisions about what activities are best, but listening to what the child has to say about their interests is a great step in determining the best activities for them."

Choosing the right activity

Parents who make "executive decisions" on what activities a child participates in might make the child miserable and shy away from full participation in the activity, according to Austin. Parents should take a look at the child's overall interests, while considering the benefits of each activity. For example, if the child is frequently around water, swimming lessons might promote safety and perhaps reduce fear of the water. However, pushing the child to be on the swim team might not be the best choice for every child if they are not interested.

When children are young, help them explore interests in an effort to develop likes and dislikes, as well as keep possibilities open. As children mature, they will develop their own opinions and interests. The best type of activity for each child will depend on their own personal preferences, the activities they are exposed to or see their friends doing, and their age or developmental stage.

Austin suggests talking to your child to find out what interests them, then explore those interests by signing up for camps or classes to see if there

is a true interest and how the child measures up to others who are participating. The conversation can then grow to identifying strengths within activities and how to use them in other activities, as well as weaknesses or potential areas of growth and how to achieve success.

"Sometimes kids are self-aware and see the opportunities for growth – especially older kids," Austin said. "Children are often open to suggestions for growth, especially if it might mean something practical for them, such as going to a specific theater camp that may help them be more comfortable speaking in front of people."

Evaluate the value of your child's involvment. Parents spend a lot of money on activities, so look at the financial commitment to make sure dollars are being spent in a positive way.

"Knowing that money is being spent on activities a child enjoys could prevent future frustrating conversations as parents are trying to push their children out the door to get to the activity," Austin said.

Preventing burnout

Parents should look at time commitments for their children and themselves. Increased moodiness, irritability, worrying, nervous habits, clinginess, fatigue and lack of enjoyment in activities may be a sign of overinvolvement or need for downtime.

"There is definitely a difference between overscheduled and opportunities for enrichment," Austin said. "Life is very busy, and downtime is essential for children. I think often we as parents and professionals forget this."

Downtime and reflection for children should be considered throughout the year providing time to reflect on success and failures, as well as how

to productively move forward in the activities they enjoy. Downtime is important for adults too. Weeks that go by without a break or without free time often leave us frazzled and stressed-out. Children feel the same way when they do not have downtime.

"Take time to check in with children and ask how they are doing," Austin said. "Lots of children, especially teens, can identify when they are stressed, but know the end is in sight. On the other hand, parents should be able to identify whether a child is not enjoying something and is struggling to finish. It is up to the parent to then help encourage the child to the end, identify changes that will help the child feel more supported, and reduce mental or physical exhaustion."

Parents and kids often get caught up in the end goal, like a recital or playoffs, with little recognition of how all of these activities are affecting stress levels. Parents may feel conflicted in allowing a child to quit an activity versus pushing the child to finish an activity they were initially enthusiastic about. The choice to quit or to push forward depends on the specific child, the situation, and the impact it is having on them physically or mentally.

Continual pushing does not provide a good example for children in learning how to set boundaries. A parent who has difficulties knowing when to take a break and continues to push their child into activities without listening may deliver the message that a break is not acceptable and that continuing until finished, even at the expense of our bodies and our brains, is always the best choice.

"This could lead to the development of the type A personality that we have all heard about, which has been found to be a risk factor for cardiovascular disorders and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety," Austin said.

Children should not quit an activity every time they are feeling pressure or stress. Setting clear boundaries initially and promoting self-care along the way can help a parent and child evaluate moving forward or quitting in a healthy way. Parents should lead by example and teach children to set good boundaries to maintain physical and mental health.

Getting out of the comfort zone

Parents should urge their children to try new activities, but be able to recognize the difference between a child's refusing to do something and being worried about doing something.

"Many of us feel the symptoms of worry creep in with new experiences," Austin said. "But, if your otherwise sweet, easy-going child is telling you 'no,' it might be good to listen from the standpoint of being supportive and understanding."

To help support an apprehensive child, ask a few more questions. Knowing why a child does not want to do something may help a parent guide them through the struggles of being uncomfortable and help them cope with new situations.

"Some children are hesitant to participate or anxious, no matter what the activity may be, and frequently I will encourage parents to give the child a deadline and encourage exploration into activities of interest," Austin said. "Sometimes this will motivate and encourage children to be an active part of the decision process."

For example, if a child has to attend a summer camp due to a parent's work schedule, but the child continues to tell the parent he or she doesn't want to go to a camp, give the child a deadline to pick a camp that would be fun and interesting for them. If the child doesn't choose, the parent will choose.

Parents should consider what might be keeping a child away from an activity by checking the social scene and what might be influencing them, either positively or negatively.

Support comes from asking open-ended questions to learn more about the situation. The parent should respond without shock or the natural response to go talk to the adult leader or the other child's parents. The child will probably provide more information regarding the severity of an issue such as teasing or the perception of teasing. The parent can help the child develop ways to problem-solve, finding solutions that will be helpful and hopefully even implemented with success by the child.

"Many negative experiences are often brief, short-lived and forgotten over the weekend – before the next interaction; but it is very difficult for children to appreciate this because it feels so terrible to them at the time, and they are more sensitive and have less experience in managing these situations," Austin said.

Parents should serve as role models, talking about how they were brave and took an opportunity out of their comfort zone that really helped them succeed or improve themselves.

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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