

## Under scheduled: Our new balancing act

Often, when I converse with parents these days, the topic of balance comes up. Driven in part by the constant rhetoric about work-family balance, parents feel an increased need to strive for days that go smoothly no matter what the demands of the day are. This is not just a challenge for two-career families. Many of my friends who are stay-at-home moms also face the balance question, though the issue is not about late pick-ups at child care but about which activities to sign-up their children for and when.

## Redefining balance

Regardless of the family's situation, the common thread is this pursuit of balance, a pursuit that seems even more elusive given how busy our lives are these days. There's a certain degree of nostalgia, a yearning for "the old days" when the world seemed simpler. How many of us have heard our own parents tell us we should slow down, we're trying to do too much? And when we hear it, how much do we really listen? Sometimes what I hear from families feels like a competition of "we're managing to do more than you." They proudly recite (or complain) about the hours, the schedule, the costs. The not-so-subtle implication is that doing more leads to a more successful outcome. I find myself asking why we feel so threatened by "not doing enough", especially when we know the repercussions of stretching ourselves too thin – anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness and failure. Aren't these the exact opposite experiences from what we want our children to have?

The catch is that as we talk about pursuing the right balance we often find ourselves tripping over our own feet instead. Personally, I feel families need to redefine what the concept of balance means. Too often, instead of making better choices, families these days are simply making more and more choices. That's not balance; that's just adding to the top of an already over-stacked pile. Think of the game Jenga, with its haphazard arrangement of interconnected pieces. All it takes is for one piece to be moved out of alignment and the whole structure crumbles. If your family's level of activity feels similar, it's time to reevaluate.

## Laid-back time

No matter how organized we think we are, events happen which can easily affect the delicate balance we all live with. I'm in the midst of one right now; I will be laid up for about six weeks as a result of a surgery. Being a typical multi-tasking mom, I made all the arrangements I could in advance. I lined up child care throughout the summer, put my children in camps the two weeks that I had no help, and started hinting to my social network that I'd be calling in favors. My neighbors are driving my children if my husband gets home late from work; my babysitter is doing my grocery shopping and we're eating take-out even more than usual.

What I didn't expect is how not having my kids in a million summertime activities has been a boon to us all. For six weeks, we had no camps, no organized sports, no travel plans, only weekly piano and guitar lessons. That makes us the un-busiest family of two preteen boys that I know of. I've had parents say, "What do they do all day?" – astonished that kids can entertain themselves. Well, they can and –when al-

lowed to – they do.

They have rediscovered things around the house they'd put aside during the school year, Yu-Gi-Oh cards among them. We've played various games of Scrabble, Outburst, Catchphrase and Yahtzee. They've gone on more bike rides around the neighborhood and visited the library more often. They've learned the sheer joy of sleeping late in the morning.

Lately our days have been spent reading our shared copy of Harry Potter aloud and discussing it together. This latest novel includes the moods and budding romantic relationships one might expect of teen characters as well as J.K.Rowling's masterfully complicated plots. Everyone else I know has purchased one copy per family member and everyone goes off into his or her own room to read and ponder. What's lost in that shared time together is virtually impossible to recreate.

My boys have also been assuming more responsibilities around the house. There's nothing magical about their age (11) that means they're more ready now than before; basically I never asked them to do as much as they could out of pure habit. But because I can't get around, they've been cooking (just boiling eggs and grilled cheese, mostly, but it's a start), doing laundry, putting away dishes and watering my garden plants. I hadn't realized how little I had taught them about household chores until I asked one son to make me a cup of tea and he said with a straight face, "OK, but I don't know how." It was an eye opener for me that I haven't let them do enough on their own.

All in all, it's really been an unexpected blessing to all be "stuck at home" together. We've had more time to chat as a family, watch Red Sox games, and look at photo albums. We've shared the workload a bit more. By the time you're reading this, I should be back on my feet, but I hope we continue to under schedule by the world's standards. It feels like the right balance for us.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Maureen O'Brien, PhD is a developmental psychologist and mother of twins who lives in Canton. She lectures and consults on child development and parenting issues and is the author of the parenting series, Watch Me Grow: I'm One-Two-Three (available at Amazon.com).