

The benefits of staying busy

Research backs up the notion that drug use is lower among kids with active schedules

By Emily Moser

As parents, we've all heard about the benefits to our children if they keep an active schedule. Whether it's sports, music, science, the outdoors or other interests, busy kids have great opportunities to learn and grow. And they are less likely to get involved in risky behavior.

Research backs this up. The more activities kids are involved with, the less likely they are to use cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs. According to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 22.5 percent of 12 to 17 year olds who were not involved in past-year activities drank alcohol in the last 30 days. The rate of alcohol use drops, however, as youth activities increase: 18.7 percent of kids involved in one to three activities reported drinking in the past month. That figure dropped by another two to three percentage points for kids involved in four to six activities. And for kids involved in seven or more activities, past-month drinking plummeted by well over one-third compared with kids who had no activities on their calendar.

The thought of your kids involved in seven or more activities may have taken your breath away for a moment. That may not be realistic for your child and family in our already busy world. The key is to find the right balance and mix; maybe it's two activities, or four. The statistics show a little in the way of activities goes a long way.

Keeping kids engaged is important all through the year, but especially during the summer and the after-school 3 to 6 p.m. stretch when they have more free, unsupervised time. Here are a few tips:

- *Make a plan.* What are your children's interests? Brainstorm with them activities that they enjoy, that will help them build skills and that reflect your family's values. If your child isn't sure what he or she would like to get involved with, consider checking out a favorite local newspaper or magazine, community center or library for ideas. Talk with other parents, too. The Internet can be a valuable resource as well.
- *Consider giving back.* Talk with your child about setting aside time to volunteer to a worthy cause. Again, encourage them to hone in on organizations and causes they have an interest in. They'll stay busy, gain invaluable perspective and experience, and help others at the same time.
- *Remember that "busy" doesn't have to mean "spendy."* The value of staying busy is effective regardless of whether an activity carries a price tag. Many activities have low or no cost, such as volunteering, spearheading their own fundraiser for a cause they care about, joining a church youth group or helping organize a summer neighborhood book review club. Helping kids build strong

bonds with community institutions has a host of benefits, and has been demonstrated to protect kids from alcohol and other drug abuse.

- *Focus on supervised activities.* Lots of kids love going to the skate park and the movies, but remember to mix in structured activities – gymnastics or swim lessons, Little League, Scouting and the chess club, for example - that give them the opportunity to learn and maybe even be mentors themselves.
- *Assess as you go.* It might take some trial and error to find the mix and amount of activities that work for your children and family. Some activities – such as an after-school program – may be tied to an activity with which they already are involved. Be realistic about the time you and your child have available, keep the lines of communication open, and consider adjustments as your child’s needs and interests change.

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