

ASK BYFS

Stressful Schedules

Parent Question: I'm finding that as my kids and my brain get older, it gets harder to find the time and energy to just be together as a family. Bedford Unplugged actually ADDS activities to an already over-full schedule. What's a parent to do????

When parents have busy lives and are trying to coordinate family lives involving busy children, stress is the result. Bedford Families Unplugged is an annual community event begun to try to help families look at their activities and consciously choose interactions that build relationships. With overly busy schedules and the need to be "plugged in" in so many aspects of our lives, finding a balance can be a challenge not just for the month of our designated Unplugged month of November but every day and every month.

The Unplugged night itself is supposed to be a do-nothing night, with the other daily activities being more ideas and options rather than mandates. We may still feel pressure either from our children or from neighbors and friends who might be invested in a special event or activity or pressure ourselves for any number of reasons. There is no reason not to schedule your own unplugged night once a week or once a month or whenever you need it - we all can benefit from a night doing nothing but spending time at home with family having a meal, laughing, and talking.

Helping our children find enough "down" time can be a bigger challenge. Bedford offers a myriad of activities and opportunities for our young through school, town, civic, and religious programs. Children do benefit from structured activities and time with friends. But we need to be cautious - too many structured activities negatively impact imagination and imaginative play. Before scheduling your son or daughter for an activity, think about what need that activity is meeting and what your child needs. Is there a skill being taught that would benefit your child in the future? Will this activity improve their self-esteem or be too much of a challenge at a vulnerable developmental stage in their lives?

We have written before on this topic in response to a similar question and talked about one experienced parent who suggested a maximum of three activities. Two of these activities you select with your child, and one you select for them because you know it will benefit them in some way. Further resources include The Pressured Child: Helping Your Child find Success in School and Life by Michael Thompson or The Hurried Child by David Elkind.

And for those of us in a position of scheduling activities for families in the community, check out the School Calendars or the Town Events Calendar on the Town of Bedford home page www.bedfordma.gov before you ink in your event. Check to make sure there is not something else going on that night that would put a parent in a difficult position deciding what to do, straining a

family with children of different ages doing different things in different places at the same time. Plan as far ahead as you can and make sure parents know about the date by adding it to the school calendar and, if appropriate, the Town Events Calendar. The more we as a community can be sensitive to the scheduling issues parents face, the easier it may be for all of us to help our children and decrease stress all around.

(Originally published February 2008)