Tips for Parentsby Susie Kohl

# *Making the Most of Downtime*

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he brain needs downtime. If my day as an adult is filled with interactions with other people, working on the computer, and doing various tasks, my brain gets no rest. What effect does a schedule like that have in the life of a child? It’s often hard for us to under-stand children’s need for downtime every day because we don’t get it ourselves and, with our busy schedules, we don’t really understand anymore what relaxed, unchallenged time for the brain is.

Our hyper-productive lifestyles also lead to many misconceptions about what relaxed time for children really is. Most of us acknowledge that being with other people all day is taxing (even though it might be fun) and that being at school itself is demanding (no matter how enjoyable and rewarding the day). The disconnect comes in thinking that playing team sports right after school or taking a time-out on a screen provides the downtime children need.

Both sports and video games require a child to be fully mentally engaged, and screen time often overstimulates children so much they don’t get adequate sleep. It’s hard for parents to deal with children’s complaints that they are bored when they are given unstructured time. Learning to tolerate unoccupied time is important for children. To process all the information, knowledge, and skills that it receives during the day, the brain (even a preschooler’s) needs unchallenged time to consolidate memories and problem-solve emotionally. It also needs enough sleep.

How helpful it is when we re-examine our schedules every month or so to see if they are truly meeting everyone’s needs.

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