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Broome County Living magazine 1986 – 1988

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Are your children “over-programmed?”

V. Sue Atkinson

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Living

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Information Center Tip

Our Information Center now has available a third catalog of publications. This catalog lists fact sheets and bulletins available in community issues. Topics covered are: community leadership, local government, water, waste, wildlife, and natural resources. If you like,

you can "shop" at home and mail in your order.

You can receive this catalog free of charge by visiting our Information Center or calling us at 772-8953. Our other catalogs cover topics in horticulture and home economics.

Cover: Supermarket shelves reflect part of the impact of dairy farming in Broome County.

Cooperative Extension does not endorse particular products, brand names or stores.

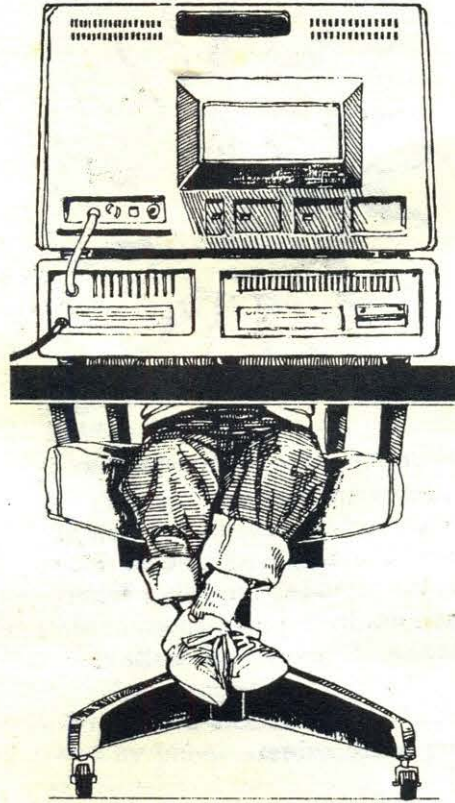
Are Your Children "Over-Programmed?"

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What are your kids doing this summer? Are they looking forward to wiling away the hours, spending long, relaxing days outdoors daydreaming under a favorite tree, and roaming the neighborhood with friends? Or are you well along in your search for summer programs, classes, camps and enrichment programs? Do you wonder how much of each type of summer activity children need?

In recent years, the trend has been toward more planned programs for children of all ages. Many of these programs are extremely beneficial; some are not. Most have the potential to enrich our children's lives when provided at the right time in the right quantity. But how to tell? Parents wrestle with this question in relation to preschool activities and extracurricular activities for school-aged children, as well as summer programs.

Frequently, I am asked by parents if all three-year-olds should go to nursery school. While I believe that most three-year-olds can benefit from a good early childhood program, it is certainly not a requirement for a happy childhood or a bright future. I suspect that a part of the concern behind the question may be that no one wants their three-year-old to be the only child on the block who's at home during the day, or their youngster to be the only one in the neighborhood



who's not away at camp or otherwise occupied during the summer.

An increasing amount of programming for children emphasizes acquiring academic skills at an early age, competitive sports, and other achievement-oriented activities. These types of activities may appeal to our competitive instincts for our children as well as our belief that children "grow up faster" and are ready for certain types of experiences earlier than in years past.

AVOID COMPETITION

It's difficult for a parent today to avoid the competition. A friend from a large urban area wrote recently of her search for the "best" preschool classes for her toddler.

"We're fortunate that all these opportunities are available, but the very existence of choices creates pressure . . .," she said.

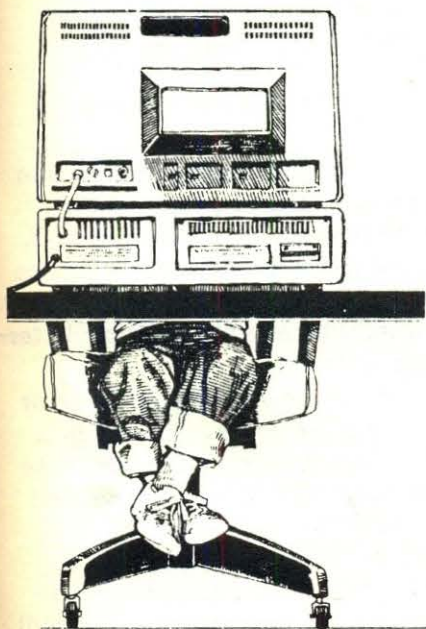
Last summer, as we sat on the lawn of a cousin's suburban New York home, I was asked about nursery school plans for my two-year-old. Upon learning that I had none (beyond her informal play group) I was urged to try to enroll her in a preschool program for three-year-olds, as her birthday was in February and surely I could "get her in." As I watched my daughter tumbling in the grass with her cousins, I wondered about the idea of pushing to "get her in" to a program designed for older children. But as columnist Judith Martin notes in her book, Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing Perfect Children, "Your truly competitive parent loses no opportunity to enter his child into competition, beginning with its birthweight."

GROWING UP FAST?

Another rationale for early and extensive programming for children is the idea that children are growing up faster today and so are ready earlier for experiences such as academically oriented preschool

programs, organized competitive sports, or infant reading programs. But are kids really different today? Consider this description of five year olds -

"The remark is often heard today that kindergarten children are different now from what they were a generation ago. They talk more easily, use longer words, express more complicated ideas. They seem older, interested in more complex things. They are much less tractable, less docile, and much more likely to rebel against restrictions . . . Of course the whole exciting drama of today - television, electric trains, war (cold and hot), mothers at work, fathers away, moving about, and spaceships - has had its impact on five-year-olds as it has on twenty, thirty, and sixty-year-olds. We adults probably see how the five-year-old differs from his age peers of the past more clearly than we see how we differ from those of our own age group a generation ago. Listening to him chatter in the lingo of today - virus, stratosphere, jets, video, power steering, atoms - doting adults are apt to think they have a wonder child in their midst . . .



The chances are he is just a normal child picking up the vocabulary of his environment. Had he lived fifty years ago on a farm he would have been talking of silos, fertilizers, planting time, harvest, and shearing.

"The differences are only superficial. Our child's potential - physical, emotional, and mental - has not changed. True, our better understanding of his physical needs has made him stronger and healthier on the whole; our increasing knowledge of his emotional and intellectual needs has made us somewhat more humane and intelligent in our treatment of him. This means that his potential is being somewhat better realized. But it is still the potential of a five-year-old, not that of an eight or even a six-year-old." (Rudolph and Cohen, Kindergarten: A Year of Learning, from the Foreword by Agnes Snyder.)

This insightful description of five-year-olds was written in 1964. The fact that it rings so true only increases the power of the message to us in 1987, a generation later.

FAMILIES HAVE CHANGED

But while children may not have changed, our families have. The numbers of children being raised in single parent families continues to increase, as does the number of two wage-earner families. Currently, 62.8 percent of women with children under age 18 work outside the home. Thus preschool, afterschool, and summer programs of various sorts may meet important family needs for care and supervision of children.

But how do we know when a program is right for a child or when a child is involved in too many activities? Often chil-

dren will tell us if we give them a chance. A five-year-old I know attends a day care program in the morning, kindergarten in the afternoon, an after-school program, and then goes to soccer practice. He often has to leave soccer practice early because he gets headaches. Everyone is concerned about the recurring headaches, but no one has asked him how he feels about playing soccer, or taken a hard look at his schedule. Child Psychologist David Elkind, author of The Hurried Child, writes about a mother who brought her six-year-old son to be cured of nail biting by hypnosis. The suggestion was made that a less demanding extracurricular program might help, but she replied, "Oh no, we can't do that."

PRACTICAL IDEAS

Some ideas for evaluating activities and programs for children:

- **Activities are "developmentally appropriate"** - based on what we know about how children at various ages learn, move, play, and work. The National Association for Education of Young Children has developed such guidelines for programs serving children from birth through age eight.
- **Children enjoy the program.** Occasional "bad days" will occur, but generally, the program will be enjoyable for the child.
- **Cooperation, rather than competition, is stressed.** In performance-oriented activities, children are urged to improve their own performance, rather than being compared to others. In team sports, all children get

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outlook is grand. She used to fight when it was time for school. Now she can't wait to go. She comes home singing songs and telling me things they did. The teacher was great."

Kid's Stuff is a cooperative effort, sponsored by Coopera-

tive Extension of Broome County; the New York State Division for Youth/Broome County Youth Bureau; the Broome County Office of Employment and Training; the towns of Barker, Binghamton, Chenango, Colesville, Conklin, Fenton, Maine

and Windsor; and the villages of Deposit and Johnson City.

The program is available to all children, regardless of race, color or national origin.

For more information, call the 4-H Office at Cooperative Extension, 772-8953.

TENTATIVE KID'S STUFF SITES FOR 1987

Town of Barker	- Charlotte Kenyon Elementary School, Chenango Forks
Town of Binghamton	- Brookside Elementary School, Saddlemire Road, Binghamton
Town of Chenango	- Chenango Bridge Elementary School, River Road, Chenango Bridge
Town of Colesville	- W.A. Olmsted Elementary School, Harpursville
Town of Conklin	- Donnelly School, Conklin
Village of Deposit	- Deposit Elementary School, Second Street, Deposit
Town of Fenton	- to be announced
Village of Johnson City	- C. Fred Johnson Middle School, Albert Street, Johnson City
Town of Maine	- Maine Memorial Elementary School, Maine
Town of Windsor	- First United Methodist Church, Chapel Street, Windsor

Over-Programmed (cont'd)

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a chance to participate, not sit on the bench and watch the "star players." Sportsmanship and team work are stressed.

- **The program has as its purpose exposure to new experiences and roles**, rather than promises of superior achievement. For example, a toddler gym program should promise fun, new activities, and peer contact, not a future as a gymnast, or even superior motor skills as a result of participation.
- **Parents can be involved** in the program in some meaningful way if they wish.

For more information on characteristics of children at different ages, request from our Information Center (772-8953):

Infants and Parents, 30 cents
 Terrific and Terrible Two-Year-Olds, 30 cents
 Three and Four-Year-Olds, 30 cents
 Child Development in the Pre-school Years, free
 The World of the Five-Year-Old, 35 cents
 The Middle Years: Six-eleven, 30 cents
 Ages and Stages: Six-eight Year Olds, 30 cents

Ages and Stages: Nine-eleven Year Olds, 30 cents
 Adolescents, 30 cents

For more information on choosing programs for pre-schoolers, request:

Some Ways of Distinguishing a Good School or Center for Young Children, free
 Child Care Services Directory, 50 cents
 Choosing Child Care for Infants and Toddlers, 30 cents
 What to Look for in a Day Care Center, 25 cents