

To Push or Not To Push

If William Shakespeare were a parent in our 21st century, instead of penning, "To be or not to be," he might be writing, "To push or not to push. That is the question." Today, many children don't just go to school and then come home and "hang out." They can be involved in a variety of organized and scheduled activities, for example, athletic teams (swimming, soccer, gymnastics), artistic endeavors (ballet classes, voice and instrument lessons), and social/community organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts and 4-H. In terms of "pushing" or "not pushing," the questions facing many parents today include the following:

1. Should I start my child in an organized activity, such as a sport or musical training, even though she doesn't express an interest in it? Do I start her in the activity because as a parent I believe it will be "good for her"?
2. What do I do when my child has been in the activity for a while, shows some aptitude or talent for it, but wants to quit? Do I require her to stay with the activity because it is "good for her"?
3. What do I do when my child has been in an activity for a while, is passionate about the activity, demonstrates some real talent, but her involvement begins to take up an inordinate amount of her (and the family's) time? When do I, the parent, decide that the soccer or the gymnastics classes or the ballet recitals have become too much?

At times, the situations that give rise to these questions can cause tension between parents and children. Sometimes a child doesn't want to become involved in the activity at all or wants to quit participating but the parent believes she should stay with the activity. There can also be the situation where a child may want to continue but the parent believes that the intensity of the involvement and the time it demands is too much and the parent wants the child to cut back or end her involvement altogether. How does a parent decide what is best for a child?

There isn't an easy formula for deciding but perhaps another set of questions can help.

1. Whose activity is it? Sometimes parents are living through their children and the child's participation in the activity is more rewarding for the parent than it is for the child. A child's success in an activity should be shining a light on her and not on her parents.

2. How stressful is the activity for the child? Sometimes the signs of stress are obvious but sometimes they are subtle so parents need to pay attention to any little aches and pains or mood changes that might be associated with the activity.
3. Is your focus as a parent on the present or on the future? Children should be enjoying the activity and not be participating for some reward or pay-off that *might* occur in the future. Working hard at soccer practice, for example, should bring satisfaction now and not be done simply for the possibility of making a team some years down the road or securing a college scholarship after high school.
4. Is the time required to participate in the activity so great that it affects other parts of the child's (or family's) life? Is it affecting schoolwork? Do friendships suffer? Is family time suffering?

What is right for one child or family may not be right for another. Answering these questions requires honest reflection and sometimes the decisions made may require that children and families resist peer and community pressures. In the end, it's important to remember that just because you *can* do something doesn't mean that you *should*.

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