Free Time: Building a Family Schedule with Room for Play

You may feel pressure to fill a child's schedule with activities such as lessons, play dates, and outings. Children need unstructured, down-time as well, so balance those structured activities with free time.

Why is free time good for children?

- **Health**. A child's body and brain need relief from demands and expectations. Rest and recreation help keep a child healthy and ready to learn.
- **Independence**. Unstructured time lets a child make choices. Children need to experience making their own decisions. Allowing children some free time helps them learn to occupy and entertain themselves.
- **Play and learning**. Children and adults need time to reflect on what they learn. A child can play in ways that let them connect new information with what they already know. Play can also help a child master stressful situations that interfere with learning. Daydreaming may be a way to figure out how to solve a problem.
- **Active play and self-regulation**. Active play helps a child have a healthy body. During free play, they can run, jump, climb, throw, and dance until they are tired. Then there is time to pause, have a drink or snack, and play quietly. A child will learn to pace themself during unstructured active play.

What can I do to create more free time?

- **Allow more family down-time**. A child may feel overwhelmed by too many family activities.
- **Select one or two activities**. You may see offerings for sports teams, music lessons, community activities, and play groups. Try only one or two scheduled activities at a time. Keep a list of what you'd like to try in the next season.
- **Check in with your child**. Ask your child if their days feel too busy. Pay attention to your child's mood. Notice how they act on busier days compared to days with more free time.

What can I do with my children when they're home?

- **Encourage creativity**. Even empty boxes or a mud puddle can inspire your child. Cook, put puzzles together, or make models. Your child will enjoy feeling competent and being close to you.
- **Provide plenty of outdoor experiences**. Walk, shoot baskets, garden, skate, ski, go to the playground, or just find things to do in the backyard or park.
- **Show your child how to play games**. Card games, board games, and physical games encourage friendly interaction and build family relationships.
- **Promote spontaneous play**. Encourage your child to play with other children in shared spaces like parks or libraries.
- **Visit interesting places**. Stroll or bike to museums, construction sites, or other interesting places together.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC).

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