

Juggling school-related activities requires full attention

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER

Special to the Record-Eagle

The final days of summer find Cheryl Saxton fitting annual physicals and dental visits for her two children into her full-time working mom schedule.

"It always seems I'm rushing to do these before school starts," said Saxton, of Interlochen, whose children are 12 and 7.

But checking these appointments off her to-do list is one way to ease the family's fall juggling act. It means she doesn't have to sandwich them between hockey practices for her son Jake and basketball games for her daughter Courtney. "We're going all the time, we really are," Saxton said of her family's increased pace come September.

Sound a lot like your life? Welcome to the world of on-the-go children, where families find their back-to-school calendar chock-full of activities, from sports practices and games to other extracurriculars like art classes, music lessons or church-affiliated clubs.

Somewhere in between all this, your family must eat. Not to mention have some semblance of a bed routine to ensure you're all able to get up the next morning for school and work. It's enough to make even the best juggler feel overwhelmed.

Don't fret, say those who've been in the throes of juggling fall activities and have survived to tell about it. It is possible to not only participate in after-school activities but also cultivate peace and joy in your family life.

First step: take a hard look at how your family is spending its time. Your goal may be to raise healthy children,

but they — and you — may be growing stressed in the process. At the very least, limit activities to one or two per season, per child, depending upon how many children are in your family. Consider, too, how much "running around" with each activity is involved.

"Don't choose an activity if it doesn't leave your family 'margin,'" says Erin Brown Conroy, author of the book *20 Secrets to Success with Your Child* (Celtic Cross Publishing, 2003), and a mom of 12. "Experts have stressed the necessity to 'leave room' between activities for our overall health. Trying to race across town in the 30 minutes between two activities builds unnecessary stress and anxiety into our lives — and into our kids' lives. If it doesn't leave room for 'margin,' don't add it."

Once your priorities are straight, keep everyone on the same page by posting a large eraser-board on your fridge or wall with everyone's activities written down.

This works for Cheryl and Paul Saxton of Interlochen. "We have a family calendar at home that we write things on. It's next to separate sports calendars on the fridge," said Cheryl. "I also have lists everywhere on my desk at work for not forgetting this, or sending money to school or having something for this activity at school."

Finding time for a nutritious meal, enough downtime and sufficient sleep can become especially challenging with more than one child participating in an activity. This affects parents, the children involved in the activity, and younger

siblings who aren't participating but end up traveling with Mom or Dad to events.

If at all possible, provide your children with at least one to two hours of downtime after school before activities begin, suggests Rallie McAllister, mother of three, physician and author of *"Healthy Lunchbox: The Working Mom's Guide to Keeping You and Your Kids Trim"* (Lifeline Press, 2003).

Then, when you're on the go, make the most of everyone's time by packing accordingly: crayons and paper, a bean bag laptop desk and a cooler packed with fruits, veggies and cold drink. Waiting parents may want to carry a portfolio of bills to pay or a craft bag with projects to tackle. Never underestimate the power of a carpool, either.

"Find two to four other parents who can work out a regular, predictable schedule of driving to activities," suggests Conroy. "Even if another person can drive all of the time, don't let them — your child needs to see you coming and going to practices too. Regular involvement speaks volumes to your child."

Saxton counts herself lucky that her own mom, who lives next door, often helps get the kids where they need to go. She also sings the praises of her nearby elementary school latchkey program as well as her employer, who understands when she must dash out to pick up one of her children or attend a school function.

"I'm lucky that I have a job that lets me work with (my kids') schedules," says Cheryl, who is logistics manager for Cherry Central Cooperative in Traverse

City. Other ideas to make the most of a busy fall schedule: Make special rituals and take turns. If two children have activities on Tuesday, let Mom drive one and Dad drive another. The next week, switch. Let each of you have your own special rituals with your child, like stopping by the coffee shop for a cookie or taking an extra five minutes beyond practice to toss the ball together on the practice field. Your child will look forward to taking turns with Mom and Dad, enjoying their special times.

Know the parks and activities in the area. When waiting for one child to finish their activity and another to begin, take the other sibling to a special park or playground. Take older children to special eateries or walking trails.

Keep sports equipment and activities in the car. Take along roller blades, baseball mitts and balls, Frisbees, or a soccer ball. When waiting for one sibling to complete the first activity and another to travel off to a second, be active with the waiting child. If activity isn't an option because of the weather, read a novel together that appeals to all ages, like *"The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe"* by C.S. Lewis.

Want to eat at home whenever possible? Consider doing as author Kristine Breese has and designate a once-a-week cereal night, when dinner is quick, easy and tailored to each child. "It's so fun, and doing the dishes is literally rinsing out a bowl. The kids think it's a hoot," said Breese, whose children are 8 and 6.

Has your family has taken on too much?

BY HEATHER JOHNSON DUROCHER
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Sometimes, in our efforts to ensure our children are "well-rounded," we end up hurting our family's quality of life.

"We often over-schedule them and fill their plate up with every available activity," said Carrie Myers Smith, mother of four boys ages 12, 10, 8 and 6 and author of *"Fitastic Kids!"* (Champion Press, 2004). "This in turn not only stresses out the parents, but also the kids. Add in kids and parents not getting the rest and sleep they need, having to eat out at fast food restaurants more often due to the schedule, and it's no wonder our youth are in the shape they're in."

If you and your children are feeling overwhelmed, it's time to call a family meeting, advised Stacy DeBroff, author of the book *"Sign Me Up! The Parents' Complete Guide to Sports, Activities, Music Classes, Dance Lessons, & Extracurriculars"* (Simon & Schuster, 2003).

"Use this as an opportunity to make a carefully thought-out decision about whether you have enough downtime to hang together as a family or if you feel out of balance," said DeBroff. "If you or your family are stretched to the max to accommodate your child's schedule, then you need to cut back on or say no to activities." Smith's family ended up prioritizing one sport over another.

"Our boys do not play basketball," she said. "All their friends do, and so yes, there is some peer pressure — and parent pressure — to allow them to play. However, due to the schedule and the long season, my husband and I felt we had to make an executive decision and oust basketball from our schedule."

"I can't even begin to tell you how much less stressful our lives are compared to the families who are driving all over, going to basketball games during the week, sometimes two hours away, and games and tournaments on the weekends," she says. "Rather than basketball, they do ski lessons. This way, they're still involved in a winter activity, but it's not nearly as time-consuming as basketball."

Breese came up with this idea, and many others to make life run more smoothly, when she was recovering from a heart attack and "had to learn to juggle as if my life depended on it — because it did."

To this day, Breese, author of *"Cereal for Dinner: Shortcuts, Strategies & Sanity for Moms Battling Illness"* (St. Martin's Press,

2004) and her family hold to this tradition. Maintaining a nighttime routine, whenever possible, is also critical, Breese says. Children rely on this, whether it's reading books or listening to soothing music before turning off the lights.

Heather Johnson Durocher is a local freelance writer.

HEAVY

Loading school backpacks properly

FROM PAGE 1

Towns, D-Memphis, who sponsored the bill, said at the time. "When children are calling out for physical help, we need to listen."

Children are strong, but they don't have the muscle mass adults have. And back muscles aren't the strongest muscles to begin with; that's why adults are always told to lift with their legs and to strengthen their abdominal muscles. Very few children have learned that yet. So if a backpack is very heavy, it overtaxes the back muscles and causes strain.

To help spare children from backpack-related medical problems, the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons suggests the following guidelines:

- Use a hip strap for heavier weights.
- Use both of the backpack's straps, firmly tightened, to hold the pack two inches above the waist.
- Use a correct lifting technique: i.e., bend with both knees when picking up a heavy backpack.
- Place the heaviest items in the pack closest to the back.
- Neatly pack your backpack and try to keep items in place.
- Try to make frequent trips to your locker between classes to exchange or replace books.

So what should you look for when backpack shopping for a young student?

A pack with a padded back and wide straps is recommended. A pouch for a water bottle can be useful as well. And of course, many of today's students prefer models that have special pouches for portable music devices like MP3 players.

There are many makers who craft quality backpacks and book bags at rea-

sonable prices. Many, in fact, have entire lines of backpack and book bag products. Among the makers with good reputations: The North Face, JanSport and High Sierra. Even Samsonite, a company more known for its sturdy luggage, has successfully entered the backpack business.

But if you want to avoid having your child carry a pack altogether, roller packs are available. Most rolling packs, which resemble wheeled luggage, come with retractable handles and in-line wheel systems.

As for regular backpacks, prices range from \$20 for a basic model to more than \$100 for sophisticated versions. Wheeled versions can cost anywhere from \$30 to \$200, depending on the model.

But if your child has been having medical problems, or has developed poor posture due to usage of a heavy backpack, a wheeled pack may seem like a bargain at any price.

Running a household during school year

Back-to-school time is often a relief for working parents, but the new schedule comes with its own stresses.

Attorney and parenting advisor Julie Shields is the author of *"How to Avoid the Mommy Trap: A Roadmap to Sharing Parenting and Making It Work"* (Capital Books Inc., \$16.95). She makes these suggestions:

- Make a list of domestic responsibilities. Include household chores like laundry, shopping, cooking and child-related work such as studying, waiting for the school bus, after-school care, sick and snow days and parent-teacher conferences.
- Assign child-care responsibilities according to skill, talent and preferences.
- Outsource jobs you both hate. A house cleaner could be money well spent.
- Set up a family calendar

and parcel out responsibilities in advance. The mother need not remind the father of responsibilities. Each one is responsible and must remedy any problems.

- Take turns with chauffeuring duties for play dates, birthday parties and extracurricular activities.
- Work out flexible hours

with both employers. Try to stagger your work hours so one parent can be home when the other is working.

- Set in place a regular mechanism to evaluate how things are going. Have a planned meeting with your spouse every week or two to discuss child-care issues and stress factors.

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