

Youth enrichment activities could harm mental health, says study

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In a new study from the University of Georgia, researchers found that the time high schoolers spend on so-called enrichment activities—including tutoring, sports, school clubs and even homework—is negatively affecting their mental health. The study also found that any additional enrichment activities are unlikely to benefit students academically.

While the ideal number of study hours will vary [student](#) by student, researchers found that adding more enrichment activities is unlikely to benefit students. Many people think additional study time or tutoring will lead to better test scores and grades, but this research shows that students are already at their limit. Any more "enrichment" will have negative returns.

"We found that the effect of those additional activities on cognitive skills, that last hour, is basically zero," said the study co-author and assistant professor of economics in UGA's Terry College of Business Carolina Caetano. "And what's more surprising is that the last hour doing these activities is contributing negatively to the child's non-cognitive skills."

Non-cognitive skills include [emotional regulation](#) and well-being, and they relate to resilience and [communication skills](#). When looking at how teenagers spend their time and how it affects cognitive or academic skills versus non-cognitive or socio-emotional skills, Caetano said most high schoolers max out the academic benefit of these activities while actively losing socio-emotional skills.

Caetano said it is best to think of the relationship between enrichment activities and these skills as a curve. For a while, an additional hour of studying, tutoring or formal activity will help students get more skills and climb up the curve of academic skills. But there is only so much time in the day, and the more time the student spends on enrichment, the less time they can spend on non-enrichment activities such as relaxing, freely socializing and sleeping.

These non-enrichment activities are also valuable for life skills and knowledge retention. If a child does not get enough rest, they could lose some of their academic gains because they cannot retain what they learned. They could also lose socio-emotional gains because they do not

get enough social practice or because they get stressed out. Eventually the losses equal the gains, and the benefits from enrichment max out.

At this point most students are at the top of the academic skills curve, and any more enrichment will decrease their academic skills.

Additionally, that time has taken away from activities that promote socio-emotional skills. This is harmful and can result in anxiety, depression and outbursts from being over extended. Essentially, the student would have been better off, in terms of noncognitive skills, if they had scaled back the enrichment activities, Caetano said.

"You're at the maximum of what you can acquire academically from that work," she said. "But on the curve for non-cognitive skills, you have gone past the maximum and gone into the descending part of the curve. You're losing socio-emotional skills at that point."

Psychologists and educators have highlighted the potential damage of overscheduling for years, Caetano said, and this paper provides solid causal evidence that supports their argument.

Opportunities to scale back children's schedules

This study used detailed data from 4,300 children between kindergarten and seniors in high school. The data was collected in the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

Researchers looked at three age groups: elementary, [middle school](#), and high school children. High schoolers face the worst situation, Caetano said, but that does not mean younger students are OK. They're at the top of the curve, she said, which means that any more enrichment and they're facing negative returns.

"If you look at middle school and [elementary school children](#), they are at

zero returns for cognitive and noncognitive skills," she said. "While they haven't gone into a negative area yet, additional work is likely to harm them."

If anything, Caetano said, we should look at the status of younger students as a chance to build more social and non-academic skills. Opening children's schedules and letting them enjoy more free time could lead to emotional regulation skills that will later benefit the busy college prep schedule high schoolers face.

"Non-cognitive skills are highly important, but people don't always think of them because they're hard to measure," she said. "They are important not only for future happiness but professional success as well."

Opening up the conversation

Caetano admits that finding a solution to overscheduling is a complicated process. It is important for children to hang out with other children in an unrestricted manner to build their noncognitive skills, and some parents might worry about taking them away from more measurable enrichment activities.

The benefit of developing lifelong skills, however, could prove more important.

"If you scale back children's activities, they could move backward slightly for cognitive skills, but their losses on non-[cognitive skills](#) are already so high that the chance might be worthwhile," Caetano said.

Additionally, the point becomes moot unless a significant number of parents commit to the change. Without widespread adoption, the kids who shift away from enrichment activities won't have anyone to play with to build noncognitive skills.

"There's something very unideal when you consider this as an individual problem. What we have here is a societal problem," Caetano said.

"There's only so much that parents can do."

The study does not provide the perfect number of enrichment hours, but Caetano says that parents should continuously assess their mental well-being as well as their child's.

"There will be variation across families, so if I were to give a recommendation, I'd say that if you have signs that, as a family, you are overly stretched, you probably are in the negative returns side of the curve, and you should scale back," she said. "If whenever someone contacts you for a play date, you are always scheduled, then it's very clear that you are overscheduled."

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Economics of Education Review*.

More information: Carolina Caetano et al, Are children spending too much time on enrichment activities?, *Economics of Education Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2023.102503](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2023.102503)

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